

Girls of Dirt

By
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Edition 4

To the incredible women of history like Joan of Arc to whom both I and Silvi owe so much.

The Dirt Books

Series 1

Dirt
Bloody Dirt
The fight for Dirt
Hope & Mistry's Tale

Yona and the Beast – Short Story

Series 2

Girls of Dirt
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Series 3

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Table of Contents

<u>Five Hundred Years Earlier</u>
<u>prologue</u>
<u>Chapter 1 – Return</u>
<u>Chapter 2 – The Touch of a Dragon</u>
<u>Chapter 3 – The Ruin of Bind</u>
<u>Chapter 4 - Memories</u>
<u>Chapter 5 – New Recruit</u>
<u>Chapter 6 - Healer</u>
<u>Chapter 7 – A King</u>
<u>Chapter 8 - Archer</u>
<u>Chapter 9 - Dragon</u>
<u>Chapter 10 – Coming of Age</u>
<u>Chapter 11 – A Little Truth</u>
<u>Chapter 12 – Old Tricks</u>
<u>Chapter 13 – Helping Friends</u>
<u>Chapter 14 – No Parley</u>
<u>Chapter 15 – The Trophy</u>
<u>Chapter 16 – The Valley</u>
<u>Chapter 17 – The Villagers</u>
<u>Chapter 18 - Allies</u>
<u>Chapter 19 – The First Step</u>
<u>Chapter 20 - Taken</u>
<u>Appendix</u>
<u>Find out more about Dirt</u>
<u>Books by C. C. Hogan</u>
<u>About the Author</u>

Five Hundred Years Earlier

An introduction for those new to Dirt

Dirt is a fantasy saga and like many sagas it is about people and family and friends and their story over years, generations, and even centuries. Although this story is set five hundred years after the events of Dirt Series One, it is still just one long tale. If you haven't read the first series you may find some of the story, some of the references to events and people, puzzling. Of course, the solution is simple; run off and read the first four books!

But if you really want to start here, then you can do one of two things, or even both. You can go to the Appendix and read "A Brief History of General Farthing and the Great Wars" written by Tooker, who you will meet in the Red Stranger Inn later in this story. Tooker was a tutor, and his account is probably not the most riveting, but it has plenty of detail.

If you prefer a less wordy account, you can stay here, go back in time a few years, and visit briefly the beautiful continent of Angyn. It is a peaceful land where thousands of dragons live in small villages and there is only one human, Mistry Jinx. The hunting is good, as is the fishing and farming. The land is warm, there is no winter at these latitudes near the equator, and there are very few crops that cannot be grown successfully, which pleases the Red Mountain Dragons, the Draig Mynyth Coh, who like brewing beer. Along a small river, a few leagues upstream from Mistry's cottage, and nestled in a valley of majestic trees by the coast, lies a village of mostly sea dragons, the Draig Morglas. Here, in the shade of a giant ash tree, a very young dragon nervously approaches a large, beautiful sea dragon with a distinctive white chest...

"Can I ask you something, Fren-Eirol?"

The big sea dragon, bigger than most, scratched her white tummy and yawned. "What is it, Be-Rosenna?"

"It's about Bac-Arweina."

"Mistry? What about her?"

"She was so angry the last time she came over to the village."

"She is frustrated, girl."

"I know I'm young, and I'm years from flying yet, but I hear you all talking."

"I know you do." Fren-Eirol set her gaze on the young dragon.

"Why is she here? There are no other humans on Angyn. I can't work out the story and nobody seems to want to talk about it with me."

"It's a very long story, girl, and very difficult for some of us."

The young sea dragon fidgeted. She was only fourteen and had been building up the courage to ask the great dragon about the past for days. "It's an important story though, isn't it? Important to us dragons, I mean."

"Yes, it is." Fren-Eirol sat up and leant against the huge ash tree. She liked sitting here in the shade, listening to the distant chatter of her dragon village. "Have you heard of Johnson Farthing?"

"No, I haven't."

"Mistry loved him a long time ago, before she came to Angyn. She met him at a slave market in a country called Jerr-Vone. He was chasing his sister and a woman called Pree who had been taken as slaves. Beautiful girls. Both had the most wonderful red hair. Johnson was pretty too," said Fren-Eirol with a chuckle. "I think Mistry fell in love with him the very first time they met."

"She's too grumpy to fall in love," mumbled Be-Rosenna beneath her breath. Fren-Eirol raised an eyebrow.

"It was different back then. They were all very young, those friends. Not much older than you. But they took on so much and had to grow so fast. It turned into a war."

"What did?"

"When they rescued Pree and Rustina, Johnson's sister, Farthing and Pree fell in love. Mistry was not impressed, but bless the girl, she tried to hide it. Farthing and Pree talked for hours and hours crossing Bind in a wagon driven by Mistry. Pree was the daughter of the ruler of Redust, a country in The Prelates, and Farthing was as poor as it's possible to be."

"Dragons are never poor," commented Be-Rosenna.

"No, we are not. We don't have rich and poor, but then we don't have rulers either. Humans have both. Pree thought Farthing's poverty was wrong and it angered her. You see, Rusty and Pree hadn't just been enslaved, Pree's father had sold them to his cousin Belin Tekkinmod; hateful man he was. So, when they returned to Redust, they decided to overthrow her father and put in place a council and mayor to run the country."

"A mayor? What, like our elder?"

Fren-Eirol burst out laughing. "Not at all. We don't listen to Bren-Hevvin and I don't think he really wants us to. Anyway, he's too cuddly."

"Fren-Eirol!"

The large sea dragon chuckled. Be-Rosenna was such a different dragon. She had none of the brashness of the desert dragons or the red mountain dragons, but she didn't have the seriousness of the Draig Morglas either. She was chatty and sometimes a bit confused, and she was constantly puzzling over everything.

"The humans like their kingdoms," said Fren-Eirol. "They like passing the rule of their countries to their sons, for good or bad. Pree said that could only ever lead to corruption and oppression. When they created the council in Redust, she insisted on very simple rules. No mayor could hold office for more than five years and only once, they could not pass on their title to any family member or suggest any replacement, and no family member could stand for office. With those rules, dynasties would be impossible. Some called it Pree's Law."

"And did it work?"

"It might have done. But Belin Tekkinmod had other plans. He put together a huge army and tried to conquer The Prelates. He believed that dragons had no place in the human world, and wanted to drive us out." Fren-Eirol frowned. "This is all so complicated, Rosie," she said with a sigh. "There were three armies in the end. Tekkinmod and his Haften Horde, Farthing, General Farthing by then, and his army of humans and dragons..."

"Dragons?" The young sea dragon blinked in surprise. "Dragons don't fight."

“There is no need to fight here, girl. But it was different then. The desert dragons of Ponack and some others joined with Farthing. Be-Elin and Mab-Abin were both involved. She took Farthing as her rider and Mab-Abin took Pree.”

“I can’t imagine Be-Elin fighting. She’s so much fun!”

“She is, but there are other sides to her too. She loved Farthing as well, and Mab-Abin loved Pree. That often happened between Draig yr Anialr and their riders. I think it was the trust needed between the two in flight. It created an almost unbreakable bond. Love.”

Be-Rosenna furrowed her brow. She only knew one human and this made no sense to her at all. “Who was the third army?”

“Duke Henry Harnon and his knights from the Western Kingdom. Oh, I’m not going into all the details, Rosie, but suffice to say it was terrible. At first, Henry declared himself an ally to Pree, but that turned out to be false. With all the deceit and fighting across the continent, Farthing was nearly beaten, and Pree had to flee to the Isle of Hope with assassins on her tail.”

“Where is Hope?”

“South of Bind. It’s a beautiful island. I flew over it when I came here. I even stopped and looked at the little cottage that Pree lived in while she was there.”

“So, did Farthing and Pree and their friends lose in the end?”

“No. Well, not really. My greatest friend was a man called Weasel.”

“Funny name!”

“Eafa was his real name, but Weasel suited him better. He was an Ancient.”

“I have heard Biel-Deieler talk about Eafa. She liked him.”

“She did. He was a thousand years old and very clever, and I think she found him exciting; you know what she is like. Weasel helped Farthing so much and they were great friends. He said the only way to win was to make sure Tekkinmod and Henry locked horns and beat each other into the ground. Then Farthing could march against the victor.” Fren-Eirol looked down. “I felt terrible for Elena.”

“Who was she?”

“Sir Tannon was a knight who turned against Henry and joined us. He was like a father to Johnson Farthing, but he was killed in a battle. Elena was his wife and later she and Weasel fell in love.” She looked up at the young dragon. “When you can live for so many years but your partner in life cannot, it is very difficult. Ancients live longer than even us dragons, and Weasel had been hurt before. He avoided anything romantic. I think that is why he and I were so close. We dragons live a long time. But he couldn’t help himself with Elena.”

“So, what happened? Did she die?”

“No. He did.” The sea dragon fell quiet.

“I am sorry, Fren-Eirol. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, it is fine, girl. Really,” said Fren-Eirol quietly. She sat a little straighter. “Anyway, they tricked Henry and Tekkinmod, and the two fought a long and bloody war. Farthing rebuilt his army, and Pree travelled to North Bind.”

“What was there?”

“Tekkinmod’s coal and iron mines. He was much stronger than Henry and the risk was that having beaten back the Heinela Cwendrin he would still be too powerful for Farthing. We wanted to cut him off from his source of steel and coin.”

“Who were the Heinela?”

“Oh, sorry. Did I leave that out? Another one of those wretched human empires. Duke Henry’s people were the Heinela Cwendrin, or at any rate, a modern reincarnation of that ancient

dynasty. They believed Pree was descended from the ancient queens of Dirt, the Cwendrinas. That is why they wanted to ally with her originally. Sorry, I said it was complicated.”

Be-Rosenna just nodded.

“So, Pree joined forces with the dragons of Ponack and the Pharsil-Hin, and destroyed Tekkinmod’s mines, weakening him.”

“Who?”

“They were nomadic archers; seven feet tall. After the battles, when Pree returned to The Prelates, the Pharsil-Hin sent three hundred of their number to be her husbands.”

“Husbands!” Be-Rosenna’s eyes popped wide open. “But that is worse than...”

“We will leave Be-Elin out of this, Rosie! They were not real husbands but they were her protectors. Tekkinmod beat back Henry, and Farthing and Pree with an army of nine thousand finished Henry off and then marched on Tekkinmod.” Fren-Eirol fidgeted and fell silent again.

Be-Rosenna studied her carefully. The young dragon was small for a sea dragon and her wings, though still too weak for flight, were slim. A couple of the dragons had commented that she was going to be very fast once she did learn to fly. But despite her youth, her chattiness, and occasional lack of confidence, she was very clever, and sometimes she saw through people.

“It went wrong, didn’t it,” she said quietly.

“Yes, girl. They beat Tekkinmod’s forces, but Pree was killed and Tekkinmod escaped. Weasel had been killed some days earlier and Mistry, who was very close to him, had vanished. It was dreadful. In the meantime, the awful disease you have been taught about had spread over both The Prelates and Bind and thousands of dragons had died. Farthing ordered the remaining dragons working with him to fly here to Angyn where they would be safe, including Be-Elin and Mab-Abin. They weren’t there at the last battle to protect their riders, and they still feel they should have been.”

“How did they know how to get here?”

“Mistry, and it’s why you call her Bac-Arweina; little leader. Before he died, she and Weasel, riding on the black dragon Bell-Sendinar, found a route. Without them, we dragons on that side of Dirt would have all perished.”

“Oh! So, what happened to Farthing?”

“He returned to Redust and tried to rebuild Wead-Wodder which had been nearly destroyed earlier in the war. I think he was doing alright at first. Rusty, his sister, went to the Isle of Taken in the middle of the Yonder sea where she kept goats and made cheese like Mistry had when she was young. I was still on the isle as was Mab-Tok and Lily. But then, Tekkinmod turned up in Wead-Wodder and he and Farthing fought. Farthing killed him, but nearly died. He was brought to Taken, terribly ill, and Mab-Tok helped him as much as he could. Farthing was so lost and hurting so much. He missed Pree, he was struggling to recover from his wounds and he felt trapped on the island. He had to leave. He needed to start again somewhere where no one knew him as General Farthing and he could just be himself again. He was still a young man. So, he went to Bind on his own, using the name of Mr Goatherd.” Fren-Eirol sighed and then smiled warmly.

“Is there a happy ending?” asked Be-Rosenna nervously, hoping she hadn’t misread the sea dragon’s expression.

“Yes, there is, incredibly. Bind was falling apart at the time. Without the Draig yr Anialr on the Eastern Plains, the Keffra-See rose up and tried to invade other countries. The Pharsil-Hin left the plains entirely and travelled to The Prelates. They felt shame that they had not protected Pree and they returned to the Beacon of Hope where she had died, to honour her memory. They

shouldn't have done that. Pree would have been furious; Farthing was when he found out. Yet another country on Bind, Hendsesse, tried to create an empire and took over towns and villages in the south; it was a mess. But when Farthing landed at the port of Tool on Bind, he met Mistry, just by accident. The two fell in love, travelled south, had a child, and ended up living on the Isle of Hope, away from all the troubles. They lived there happily for more than twenty years until Farthing died. He had never fully recovered from his wounds, but he had a good life."

"So how did Mistry turn up here? All the dragons had left, hadn't they?"

"And we great dragons couldn't have carried her here anyway. The distance is too great, and we have to fly too high for a human to breathe. I was the last dragon and I left only a few months after Farthing sailed from Taken. Once Farthing died, Mistry decided to travel again. You have to understand something about my adopted daughter. She lost her home and her father when she was fifteen and she has been looking for a home ever since."

"She has a beautiful cottage here."

"Yes, and I still hope this is her home, but I worry. I'm not convinced she has finished travelling yet, even after all this time. She left Hope and made her way north, slowly. No dragons now and she was driving a little wagon pulled by two horses. During the wars, Mistry had been one of the best dragon riders ever. She paired with Mab-Onin and they were wonderful to watch. Idiots, most of the time, and took far too many stupid risks." Fren-Eirol rolled her eyes upwards at the memories. "They were so badly injured after one of their many unauthorised missions that he lost a leg and she nearly died."

"We dragons can't fly if we lose a leg," said Be-Rosenna with certainty. "We can't take off."

"You can't fly at all yet, Rosie!" pointed out Fren-Eirol. The young dragon shrugged. "Well, no one told those two, and they managed it. The strength they both had in their hearts was unbelievable, and Mistry hadn't lost it all those years later. She was in her fifties but looked in her twenties. She didn't want to go to The Prelates, which some were calling Preland by that time, named after Pree, so she travelled all the way to the north of Bind and ended up at a place called The Abbey in the Black Hills. There she stayed for a couple of years. Then one day, Bell-Sendinar flew from here and found her. He brought her back to me, Rosie."

"But that is years and years ago, Fren-Eirol. She still looks young, I think." Of course, Be-Rosenna had never met any other humans.

"Weasel had changed her. I don't understand how, Rosie, so don't press me, but somehow, he did. He gave her a long life." And other problems, Fren-Eirol reminded herself quietly, thinking of the long conversations her adopted daughter had with the Ancient's memories she carried in her head.

"So why does she get so angry? I like her Fren-Eirol, but she can be very difficult sometimes."

"I know, girl. Mistry has the cleverest mind I have ever met, including my dear Eafa. But she still thinks about Farthing and Pree and what they tried to achieve. We all lost so many friends. Sometimes it makes us sad, and sometimes it makes us angry."

Fren-Eirol closed her eyes and leant against the tree. Be-Rosenna took that to mean the story had ended. She hoped she had done the right thing in asking. Her own life was uneventful and peaceful. She farmed with the other young Draig who had yet to learn to fly, and she loved her neighbours, especially some of the older dragons who had once lived in The Prelates and Bind. They told stories of their lives and of living in those distant lands, but they never spoke to her about the war or the difficult journey they had taken to Angyn. She often wondered what it

would be like to live in Bind or Preland and to meet more humans. Might there ever be a time when she could go there? Would one day the disease that had killed so many of her kind be no longer a threat? It was a little dream of hers, but one she kept to herself.

Prologue

"She's a beautiful child," said the grey-haired, aged woman, watching the three-year-old playing in the sand.

"Yes, she is," said Elena warmly. "Would he have liked a girl?"

"I think so. What is her name?"

"Eiferra; it means bright one. But she gets it mixed up and calls herself Ferret!" Elena laughed.

"Eafa would have certainly appreciated that," said Sen-Liana with a smile, her tired, old eyes wet with the smallest of tears.

"I'm sorry, Sen-Liana, but Weasel didn't really talk about you."

"It was a complicated relationship, and much of it was my fault, but that is between me and the memory of my son."

"I understand."

They were sitting on the beach along the shore by the small villa built on the ruins of the earlier property that Weasel had burnt down a few years before.

"I have a present for you, which is why I made this journey." Sen-Liana pulled from her bag two parcels. "This is a book that has been written by me and several others over many, many centuries. It will tell you everything you need to know about your daughter and her father, or as much as I have been able to discover. When I was young, I did not have this book. I made some terrible mistakes and Eafa did not know who he really was. Please read it and keep it for Eiferra for when she is older; when she comes of age, I think. The other parcel is simply all the original writings from some of the mates of the True Magicians. Most of it I have transcribed into the new book, but there are some passages that I have never been able to read because they are so very old. They are the family scrapbook, in a way, and perhaps with your younger, fresher eyes you will make something of them; they are her legacy now." The old woman frowned. "Elena, I think I have made so many mistakes in my assumptions and understanding, and I know that Eafa was very dismissive of some of my ideas. He discovered more before he died that he chose not to share with me, but still, these books may contain something that can help you in the years ahead. Perhaps once Eiferra has reached her maturity, you can explain my misgivings, and she will discover the truth somewhere else. Let her be a child first though and tell her all later. That was denied to Eafa in some ways, and I regret that."

"What will you do now? You could stay here, Sen-Liana; you have travelled so very far from the Abbey."

"No, Elena. This is now your role, not mine, and I have done my part. But you have my love as does my son's daughter. Can we just sit and watch the sea for a while? It is so beautiful here, and I am very, very tired."

“Of course. Eafa wanted this to be his home, and I built the villa for him, so please stay as long as you wish.”

The two women and the small child sat on the sands and gazed out to the west while the red sun slowly settled, and Elena dozed for a while, the little girl in her arms. When she awoke, Sen-Liana had died in her sleep. She was over a thousand years old, and though her legs had hurt so badly towards the end, she now looked peaceful and content. Elena buried Sen-Liana in the olive grove next to another well-tended grave. Above it, nailed to a tree, was a plank of wood on which was painted a rude cartoon of a duke with his trousers around his knees. Under the drawing, the artist had scrawled, “Lots of Love, Weasel.”

Chapter 1 – Return

“Bloody stupid thing!” Silvi Farthing kicked the door of the small cottage in frustration. “Open, dammit!” She kicked again, and the door sprang open with a rattle and a shudder, and she looked out into the sunlight. Getting trapped in your own cottage was, if nothing else, embarrassing.

“Locked in again, Silvi?”

“Piss off, Edden.”

“Charming!”

“Little git,” muttered Silvi under her breath.

She had chosen this particular stretch of the coast for three reasons. Firstly, it looked out south over the Missing Sea and benefited from the warm currents, making it probably the warmest coastline on Dirt. Secondly, it was eight long leagues from the rest of her family, which had to be a good thing one way or another. Thirdly, it boasted a ruined tiny cottage that was perfect for one little blonde with slightly chubby cheeks who wanted time on her own. And fourthly... oh, yes, there was a fourth reason, Silvi reminded herself; no one else lived here. Which brought her back to the annoyance of Edden; a sixty-something, pain in the arse of a fisherman who liked to dry his nets on the rocks on the odd occasion that he sailed by in his boat.

The door had swelled during the storm season. When she had been allowed to take over the old cottage, it had no roof, no shutters, and no door. Inside, she had discovered centuries-old remnants of what might have once been a packing case and some broken pieces of terracotta. Beer bottles? Perhaps, but it was hard to tell. No one knew anything about the building, and the sad old place had sat here forever, full of sand and dust. In some ways, this little coastline was the perfect place to start her new life. There was a stream next to the cottage, a tiny arm of the River Ten, the rocky ground was easy to build on, and there were a few trees scattered around the scrubland to offer shade when needed. Having said all that, it was right on the edge of a large area of dunes and stony desert called Ceosei, and the islanders preferred to be in the lush surroundings of the fishing village of Ten Bay and everything west and north. Well, what was a problem for others was just perfect for Silvi.

“Are you staying long?” she shouted to Edden.

“No. Just picking up the nets and then I am gone for two months.”

“Good. Make it three.”

“Whatever, darling!” cackled the old bloke, and disappeared around the corner.

If he was gone for two months, he was off on a whaler, and Silvi would have complete peace and quiet for the next eight weeks. She could mate her goats, sort out the door and the hole in the roof, and lie down on the rocks to work on the lovely brown skin she was determined to have this year, assuming she didn’t burn first.

"You are vain, little girl," she said to herself, sitting down on the small veranda to light a fire and boil up the rest of last night's coffee. She knew she was acting strangely for her age. Other girls were husband hunting or just hunting for a good romp behind a tree somewhere. Or they were taking on some job in the family business and trying to behave correctly according to their parent's wishes. Everything that came with living on a great big island with only twelve thousand people scattered over it. But, for a whole mix of reasons that she didn't like to talk about, a year ago, Silvi had sat up in bed at her father's house, taken a long look at herself in her polished copper mirror, and knew she had to get out of there. It was not that her father was some terrible ogre, at least when he was sober, or that being the only girl in a family of seven was some dreadful punishment, but she was just so different from the rest of them. Her mother had died when Silvi was only two or three, and during the day she had been looked after by the mothers of other children down their lane, and a handful of times by some distant relation of her mother. When she had grown older, having someone in the house to talk to about her changing body and feelings would have made her feel less isolated. Silvi's father and brothers, all older than her, were very similar; rough, tough, working men who just had no time for her. They didn't hate her, she hoped, just didn't care much about her in their male chauvinistic way. Her older brother Den had told her several times they expected her to marry some mug like a good girl and become someone else's problem. Silvi refused to oblige.

"My head hurts," she told a seagull, who was sitting on a rock looking hopeful. "Idiot bird. Ten Bay Village is eight leagues that way. Loads of fish there, unless you want a coffee." The bird put its head on one side and picked at a wing.

"See yer!" called Edden, walking the other way up the rocks, dragging his nets.

"Go drown!"

"Will do, you skinny runt!"

The banter was always the same when he came down to the rocks. Silvi reflected that it would be quite fun if she actually liked him, but Edden was a miserable man from a long line of miserable men. Unsurprisingly, he was a friend of her father. With him safely out of sight, Silvi took off her loose shirt and dragged her fingers through her hair, enjoying the fresh breeze on her skin. "Swim! Oh, no; goats first. Damn." She grabbed her goat-friendly clothes, took the pot off the fire, and climbed over the fence of her paddock which was just over the stream from Silvi's House, as it was now officially known.

It really was a tiny little home. The thick-walled building had two rooms; a bedroom that was about three paces by three and an everything-else room that was four by three. She had built a shed on the side by the stream which she used for washing, both her and her clothes, and another shed out the back for all her cheese making. The rough paddock was only twenty paces square, but during the day, her little tribe of goats wandered free over the scrubland to graze. Silvi hopped along the stepping stones across the stream and leapt over the fence.

"Morning, boys and girls!"

She didn't have many goats, but it was enough so she was making plenty of cheese. Some she took weekly to Bay, the local fishing hamlet along the coast, and the rest to the town of Home every three or four weeks, where she supplied several stallholders and the ancient tavern, The Pub by the Waters. Apparently, it had been the very first tavern on Hope and had been built about five hundred years back by her ancestor Johnson Farthing, one of the first people to live here. It was all very vague, and no one was sure about the history of the building or cared much. All she knew about this Mr Farthing was that she was related to him and she was named after either his wife or his sister or his great-granddaughter, or someone. That was about it. But he

had always fascinated her, and she would have loved to have known more about him. Why had he come to the island? If he was the first here, then the island must have been empty. Why was it? Was he exploring, running away, a bit like her, or was he some hero or trader? She had tried to discover more, but the island's capital town of Dragon Bay was a long journey north, and her one attempt hadn't produced anything much. Too many records had been lost over the years.

"I wonder what you were like, Mr Johnson Farthing. What did you do? Fisherman or farmer? Or were you really the landlord of the Pub by the Waters? You are a puzzle, great, great, and loads more greats granddaddy!" Silvi pushed a nagging boy-goat away, and checked one of the females. Once they were pregnant again, the boys would be separated. They were a small breed of goat, unlike the big ones up in the Gewil Hills, but were perfect for this rough terrain. Larger goats might have had to wander far further to get enough to eat from the scrubby plain.

"Do, you think he was a good-looking man, Milli?" she asked the goat. "Tall, perhaps? Muscular with a big confident smile?" Silvi thought about her short, broad father and assorted brothers and laughed to herself. "No, probably not. Nothing wrong with what my dad looks like, but I am damn glad I take after my mum! Everyone says she was a right little beauty when she was young." The Farthing family was well known in the village of Ten Bay, but not always for the right reasons. "Next goaty, please!"

Goats now thoroughly checked, Silvi stood and stretched.

"Now, my turn!"

The cottage overlooked a rocky shore by the ocean, only just within the shelter of the large bay. A scramble down the rocks brought her to a steep shoreline of pools, pebbles, and white rocks eroded smooth by the sea and then, "Yeee Hooowww!" Straight into the sea she went with a splash.

"Oh, you bitch! That's a bit cold! Wish you would warn me, ocean dear."

The warm currents that flowed down the east coast of Bind and wrapped themselves around the island could be unpredictable at times, and would throw in a cold current occasionally just to spite her. Still, it was what she had needed. Silvi was not a hermit, and she had spent the evening before with her closest neighbours; a young couple of women who owned a small farm half a league up the stream from her little holding.

The Tennet, an arm of the larger River Ten, flowed eleven leagues east-south-east from where it split off from its parent, and the community of farms spread along its length suited Silvi perfectly. Although she was the youngest of the farmers, most were only in their twenties and only two had children. Yet these were all people that wanted what Silvi needed; to be left alone. When she had moved in, her nearest neighbours, Deni and Sarana, had turned up with a few pots of rough, home-made wine and the three girls had become blissfully drunk together. Last night was pretty much a repeat, and Silvi was not sure she remembered getting home. Luckily, her little pony that pulled her two-wheel cart, knew her way up and down the Tennet without help.

"Oh, I bet she is still hitched up!" Silvi pulled herself up onto the rocks, slipped on her sandals and chucked her coarse towel around her shoulders. "Sorry!" she said in embarrassment, popping around to the other side of her little house where, indeed, the small horse was standing, still harnessed up to the cart, but munching happily on a bale of hay hung from a peg. This was not the first time the girl had been so neglectful, but she knew the small horse could sit down even when harnessed. She quickly unhitched the pony, released all the straps, and dusted her down with the damp towel. "Go on, have a drink from the stream and a roll while I put some clothes on, and sorry again!"

Just to add insult to a night in harness, she had to deliver four large, round cheeses and the last of her small soft cheeses to the store in Bay, two leagues up the coast. Then pick up veggies for herself before returning to work in the shed.

“Oh, and I better get some carrots for you, Telli. Sorry again and again.”

Although the coast around Ten Bay was rugged and rocky with no sandy beaches, the region was almost flat, and the pony trotted along merrily having forgiven her owner for her night of drunken, giddy transgressions. Silvi liked Bay. It was home to around two hundred and fifty people, and she had contemplated moving here before she had found her little house. It would have been more difficult. All the nearby land had been claimed in the fifty years since the founding of Bay, and she would have had to rent, probably relying on her unreliable father till she had built up the cheese business. That was assuming he would have helped her at all since her family had very conservative views about women. Her cottage and the smallholding was of no interest to most because the land was unsuitable for anything other than goats, and mooring a boat was difficult. Under an old law that dated to the original settlers, as long as she could live in it for a year and a day, and show she had worked the unforgiving land, it was hers. Silvi had completed that task now, and the property had been signed over to her the day before which was why she had gone for a drink with the girls.

Bay was the youngest settlement on the island, and was home to a fresh and optimistic community. Most of the buildings were part stone and part wood, built from the tight-grained and weather resistant hardwoods that grew up in the forests of the Gewil Hills. The residents had decided that bright colours and the months of sunshine were a match made for the gods, and many of the buildings if not white were light blue, terracotta or yellow, all bleached clean by the sun. The store down by the pebble beach where the fishermen pulled up their boats attached to long lines, was community owned and run, and sold just about everything. It was a long, single-storey wooden building, painted bright yellow, with a broad veranda running along the entire length under which many of the goods were displayed. It was not the only shop on the front, there was also a butcher, a baker and a potter, but everything else was to be found here.

“Morning Silvi, you look awful,” said Jack with a smile.

“Thanks, lover. So glad you appreciate me!” He wasn’t her lover. Jack’s wife was gorgeous and they were as strong as anything, but Silvi liked teasing him.

“Well, to be fair, you look better than Sarana did this morning.”

“What was she in for?”

“Good question. It took me nearly fifteen minutes to get it out of her, she was that bad. It was hooks and a new line, in the end; you know how she likes fishing in the Tennenet.” The stream was not very big, it was only four paces wide by the time it chuckled past Silvi’s paddock, but they had some reasonable little fish in it. “I gather you were celebrating taking ownership of your house.”

“Yep. All mine now, darling. You are talking to the local laird with her huge ranch of six hundred square, erm, paces!”

“Well, take an extra beer on me, Silvi. You have earned that this year.”

“Thanks, Jack. And thanks to both of you. Your little shop has made it possible. Talking of which, I have your rounds of hard cheeses, and I have brought the last handful of those little ripe, soft cheeses you like.”

“Oh, thanks, Silvi. The soft cheeses sell so fast. I could take more if you can make more.”

"I need to buy more wooden sangles to wrap around the cheeses first. There is a bloke up in Gewil Village who is going to make me a batch once I can get the coin together. But I am thinking of doing a variation using cloth and herbs and a slightly harder rind. Would you be interested?"

"Probably. Will they bake?"

"I would think so; the soft goat's cheese normally does."

"Jon at the White Rock Tavern might take some of those. Cheese and bread are his big sellers at lunch times. Anything other than fish, basically." Jack laughed at his own joke. The trouble with living in a fishing community is that you could get sick of fish.

"I was going to pop in for a beer anyway, so I will ask. Do you want these rounds in the back?"

"Please. The back door is open. You need anything?"

"Only a few bits."

"Give me the list and I will bring it through with your change from the cheeses."

"Thank you kindly, dear sir!" Silvi gave a small, exaggerated bow which gained her smiles from the other shoppers, and she delivered the cheeses to the back of the store and collected her groceries.

Bay was always busy during the day. A small village, it serviced itself and the many small farms like Silvi's around the area, but the residents were always up and doing something. Of course, it was also lunchtime, and there was nothing the folk of Bay liked more than sitting under the small trees outside the White Rock eating cheese and drinking beer. Since it was busy, Silvi didn't pester Jon, the landlord, but just grabbed a beer and a hug from his daughter Tosie, and sat at a small table, looking out to sea.

"What you dreaming about now?"

"Den, what are you doing in Bay?" Den, her eldest brother, was twelve years older than she was. They were more or less civil to each other, but they had never got on.

"Selling one of the small boats to a fisherman down here. You?"

"Needed some bits from the shop." Silvi had no interest in discussing her cheese business with her pain of a brother; she wasn't even sure he knew what she was up to. When she had left, he had laughed saying she would be back in a week and wanting a husband.

"Are you still in that old wreck of a place? Done anything with it? Bet you haven't. When are you going to get yourself a husband so you can find somewhere proper?"

"Year and a day, mate," she said with a self-satisfied grin. "All mine now, and no renting from some bloke who don't care."

"Stupid law that. Letting women own stuff. They don't know what to do with it."

"As you have said for as long as I can remember, Den. Well, we can. And up here, half the farms are owned by women and even a couple of the boats. All doing fine and dandy, mate, with no help from ignorant prats like you."

"You never could keep your mouth shut, sister, like you should."

"Nope, and I am not planning on changing neither. Now, this is my world, not yours, brother, so be nice and piss off."

"Yeah, like you can make me."

"If she can't, we can, Den. Go away." Two big fishermen, Greg and Derry, wandered up smiling nicely.

"Don't worry about it, he won't do nothing. Will you Den?" said. Silvi

Her brother grunted, muttered something under his breath and walked off down to the beach.

“Are all your family like that?” asked Greg, sitting down.

“More or less, but he and Ike are the worst. They have never done me much harm, but they just can’t understand that I want more than they have, and want to do it my own way, not wait around for a husband to do it for me.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Derry. “I fancy the idea of a wife doing all the work and me just sitting around drinking beer.”

“I don’t think it works quite like that!” said Silvi, laughing.

“Really? Pity!”

The two fishermen were well known in the area for being big, strong and generally jovial. They were both married, but spent more time with each other than with their wives, which was a running joke. Like everyone else in Bay, they were hard-working and made the best use of what little free time a simple life offered.

“Did I overhear you say you had done your year and a day?” asked Greg.

“Yep! Everything signed off yesterday and the hangover to prove it. I am going to have to get some new friends. I am going to be lucky to see twenty with Deni and Sarana.”

“They do like their drink, I noticed,” commented Greg with a grin. “Last time they came to Bay, Jon had to dump both of them in an upstairs room because they were too drunk to find that big horse they ride together.”

“Really? Imagine that,” said Silvi, guiltily. “Talking of which, madam is tied up behind the shop. I better go before she eats Jack out of carrots. Thanks for the support, lads.”

“A pleasure, Silvi, and welcome to the area proper!”

The sun had finished for the day when Silvi locked up having turned all her cheeses. She would spend all the following day working in the shed, but for now, she wanted to light her lamps, build her fire outside and have a nice pot of coffee.

“I have had it with you, Silvi!” yelled her brother, emerging from the shadows.

“Den, what the hell are you doing here? And Ike. You too?”

“You know, our old man always lets you get away with stuff, Silvi, but we have had enough. You are coming home, and we are getting you married.”

“Forget it, Den. I am not ready, and even if I were, I wouldn’t choose you to be a matchmaker.”

“You are only seventeen!”

“Old enough on the island. You can’t make me do anything I don’t want to do.”

“What, that stupid charter they have at Dragon Bay Town? We don’t listen to what they tell us. We do what we want, and you do what we say.” The man reeked of ale and stepped back as he lost his balance. “You are coming home right now, and this is finished, stupid stuff.”

“Don’t you sodding well dare, Den. You’re both pissed as rats!” Silvi was scared. Den had gone for her before, but her father had always been there to stop him. Here she was on her own.

“Oh, I dare!” slurred Den, and grabbed for her drunkenly as she jumped back out of his reach. Ike laughed.

“Slippery, ain’t she Den. Let’s get her!” The younger brother staggered and lurched towards her, grinning in an unbrotherly way.

“Go that way!” shouted Den. The two split up while Silvi backed towards her shed.

“Leave me alone!”

“Oh, all scared now! No big friends around?”

“Get out!” she screamed, the fear making her voice shrill. In a panic, she turned and bolted into the gloom, splashing through the stream and out on to the scrub.

“After her!” shouted Ike, and the two men raced after the girl, evil etched on their drunken faces.

The scrub was rough, and Silvi ran only fifty paces in the growing darkness before she slipped and skidded across the ground, scraping her face.

“We got her, bro!” shouted Ike, staggering and giggling. “Quick, grab her hands and feet!”

“Leave her!” The voice boomed from the dark sky above the two men, and they slid to a halt.

“What was that?” yelled Den, spinning around and trying to shake the drunken fog from his head. A huge shadowy ghost appeared over the girl.

“I said leave her be!” The apparition lowered its head to the level of the men and drew two long, sharpened spears from its shoulders. “Leave or die. Your choice.”

“Den, let’s get out of here!”

“What is it?”

“I don’t care! Ghost or something!” Ike was scared and very drunk.

The shadowy beast raised its head and roared, the terrifying sound echoing over the scrub. Den and Ike turned and ran, slipping and tripping and sliding over the rough ground, splashing through the stream, and then, grabbing their horses, galloped away along the path.

“Please, don’t hurt me,” said Silvi, her voice shaking with fear.

“Why would I do that?” The apparition sounded surprised.

“I don’t know! I don’t know what you are!” Silvi was curled into a ball between the huge, taloned feet.

“Oh. No, sorry, you wouldn’t, would you.” The massive, shadowy creature chuckled quietly and then spoke gently. “My name is Be-Elin, girl, and I am a dragon.”

Ferret picked an olive and ran it thoughtfully around her mouth before biting into it and nibbling the flesh away from the seed.

“Close,” she said with satisfaction. “You’ll be perfect in another week.”

Of everything she grew, the olive trees were, for her, the most special. The small grove was over six hundred years old, and she had been tending it for about five hundred of those, give or take. So, this would be her five hundred and second crop, possibly. It sounded enviable until you considered all the complications associated with trying to explain to the neighbours why you had lived quite such a long time. Actually, the neighbours weren’t too much of a problem. The nearest lived a couple of leagues away and they kept getting old and dying, so they didn’t take much notice.

Selling the olives was more complicated. She tried to vary who she sold through to avoid anyone noticing she still looked in her early twenties when she probably ought to be extremely wrinkled. It was never perfect, and several times now she had put the villa in the care of one or other farming family, sent polite notes to everyone and disappeared off in a wagon for a few years calling herself Miss Horseman.

True Magicians, as her grandmother called them in her book, though an added scribbled note from her mother said they should be called Ancients, did not age like a human did. You did suffer from wear and tear, but as long as you took care of yourself, you could stay young-looking your entire life. Or you could act like her father had and look a lot worse for wear most of the

time. She had never met him, to her regret. He had died in Preland somewhere and was buried on the edge of the olive grove. So too was her mother.

According to the book, the mate of an Ancient also lived an unnaturally long life, though the explanation of why was a mess of conjectures by her grandmother, most of which made no sense at all. It was all far too mysterious, magical, and mythical. Well, Ferret was one of these Ancients, apparently, but she didn't feel much like a myth. In the end, when she was only seven years old, her mother had died of an infection she had picked up when she had cut herself. Such a mundane thing that had led to such tragedy. The little girl had tried to help when the fever took hold, but she hadn't known what to do, and had no idea that she had the power within herself to push the infection back. She had gone to live with Lady Evana and her husband Lord Seran in their castle in Tesson until she was twenty, when she had thanked them and returned to the Villa to start her long, sometimes isolated life, and read the book Evana had kept for her on behalf of her mother.

"Oh! What was that?"

Living so long had made Ferret sensitive to the unexpected and something had just passed behind her somewhere that was very definitely out of place. The book said she should be able to sense and recognise anything around her, but that had turned out to be yet another myth. Yes, she could find her horse without trying, but that was because she knew what a horse was and her horse in particular. But she would have problems with a cow because she didn't keep cows and had no idea what they should feel like. There was also the tiny annoying problem that if she tried too hard, she would feel sick.

"Again?"

It felt like something had tapped her on the shoulder, and it was a most disturbing sensation; familiar and yet incredibly strange all at the same time. The afternoon was drawing to a close, and she walked from the olive grove onto the beach. The coastline was flat and sandy for several leagues either way; a long, broad beach that was perfect for riding horses. When she was little, her mother had told her that she and Ferret's half-sister Elgrieve, would spend hours racing up and down the sands or galloping through the surf. It was something that Ferret enjoyed herself.

"Well, what are you and where are you?" The Ancient removed her wide-brimmed hat, a particularly unflattering item that she adored, and used it to shield her eyes from the sun, now setting over the Missing Sea. "Again, where are you?" This time, it was but the briefest of shadows across the glare of the sun, some way out to sea, but not far. "Someone is playing games with me!" Ferret turned back to the villa with a huff and marched to the stables. Well, if whoever it was wished to play silly buggers, she should be on her favourite Colny mare. Saddles had always been optional for Ferret, as were bridles, bits, reins, or anything else, so she just opened the gate and leapt up onto Penni, swinging onto her back the soft bag she always carried. "Come on, girl, we are going hunting, I think." As they trotted around the side of the stable, Ferret grabbed the longbow and quiver from where it hung on the wall and galloped onto the sands.

"Now, where are you?" She was not fond of people playing with her, but it was also intriguing. She liked her life, but it could be terribly predictable and uneventful, and this was offering up something new, she supposed. "North or south, Penni? Want to choose?" The horse looked both ways and Ferret laughed out loud in surprise. "Well, that was singularly unhelpful, young girl. Oh, hang on; there is lump up there." To the north, on the sands, there was a dark, shadowy something. Ferret had no idea what it was but realised it had to be big for her to see it at this distance. "Come on, girl."

As the two raced up the sands, the lump suddenly leapt into the air. Ferret pulled the horse to a stop in amazement. "Bloody hell, Penni. Is that a dragon?" As soon as she said it, she could sense it, and now she knew why it felt so familiar. "Quick, chase it!" The horse bolted up the sands, the big white animal stretching out its legs and head, its great hooves pounding on the flat, damp sand while Ferret leant forward over the beast's neck, her hair flying behind her. Several times, the shadowy dragon landed and waited for a moment and then took off again, leading her up the sands, league after league. Eventually, the Ancient brought her horse to a stop.

"Sorry, girl. It is still playing, but it will have to wait because you are exhausted. Whoever it is wants us to notice them, so we'll camp here and they can wait until morning."

Ferret walked her horse over to where the sand became grass and sat under a tree. She was not exactly attired for a night out, but she was resourceful. With a fair amount of cursing and bashing of stones she managed to light a fire while her horse padded around in the dark.

"Now, will you come to me, dragon shadow? What do you want?"

Growing up with Evana and Seran as they tried to build a new world in the strife-filled Western Kingdom, Ferret knew more than many about the world around her and its history. For most people, dragons were something of legend now, nothing more than silly stories for children, but she knew the dragons had left when the disease had spread across the continents killing all who remained, including the small goman dragons in the West. And she knew of the terrible death of Pree and that both Mistry and Farthing had vanished. What had become of them, she knew not. It was thought that Farthing had died on Taken, the small island in the Prelates Sea, but of all the others who had been involved in those terrible wars, nothing now was known. Five hundred years later, it might be pointless to even wonder about such historical fates, but these were people both her father and her mother had loved. She owed them to be at least curious. For the moment, the most important of those histories was the dragons had fled or died; all of them, without exception. Now, one was playing with her.

Ferret awoke at dawn, nuzzled by her horse. "Oh, alright, you want a drink, don't you? I don't suppose you remembered the small stream a couple of hundred paces inland? No? Come on, then." She resisted the urge to run out to the sands as she was sure the dragon would wait if it was important. This was not like chasing a bird; dragons had agendas. The stream was closer than she remembered, and she took a drink and washed her face while her horse had her fill. "Enough, dear Penni. They haven't come looking for us, so we should return to the sands and look for them."

When she reached the beach, she could see a distant shape on the sand, but as they started trotting towards it, it took off once more. "Oh, you pest!" she cursed. "Well, I'm not risking my horse again. You can wait." Ferret and Penni continued at a comfortable trot until they reached where the dragon had been sitting. "Now where have you gone?" The woman looked around, getting her bearings. "This is interesting, Penni. We own this land we do. This is the land that my mother bought for dragons before she knew about the disease. I wonder..." She turned inland, crossed to the grassy scrub, and trotted towards a small hill, not much more than a rise. The large, beautiful, tan and sand dragon alighted on the hill and waited for her.

"It's a lovely spot this," said the dragon in a warm, cheerful voice, looking around at the hill and the small woodland behind.

"It was chosen for sea dragons," said Ferret, calming her horse who was not very happy. "Do you mind if I let her go play on the beach?" she asked.

"Please, do. Colnies always had problems with us."

Ferret raised an eyebrow, jumped down, and sent Penni back to the beach to play in the surf. She would come when called.

“Why did you want to bring me here?”

“To see if you knew what it was. It was a sort of test.”

“I am over five hundred years old. Was that not enough?”

“You look twenty, so not a lot of help, no,” answered the dragon, chuckling. “Is your mother here?”

“No. I am sorry, she died a long time back.” For some reason, the loss of her mother upset her at that moment in a way that it had not for hundreds of years.

“That is a great pity, and I am sorry. How long ago?”

“When I was seven.”

“Ah, that is a problem. What is your name?”

“Ferret; I mean, Eiferra.”

The dragon smiled. “Ferret? Weasel would have loved that!” The dragon suddenly looked concerned. “Eiferra, are you crying?”

“I am. I’m sorry, but I don’t know what is wrong with me. What is your name?”

“I am Mab-Abin. Pree was my rider and Weasel, your father, was my friend.”

The five-hundred-year-old young Ancient could stand it no longer, and she rushed to the dragon who leant down and held her close.

“Oh, Mab-Abin, why are you here?” she asked, steadying her breath, and feeling foolish and embarrassed.

“Because you are going to need a dragon, and I am going to need you.”

“Why?”

“It’s a bit complicated, but here I am, and your training starts tomorrow.”

“What training?”

“Eiferra, I want to train you to be my rider.”

Silvi sat on the ground on the scrubland behind her house with her arms wrapped around her knees. Every instinct she had was screaming at her to run away as fast as she could and never come back here again. Yet, she was still sitting there. In front of her, the huge, rather elegant dragon, was chewing a nail.

“What, you don’t chew your nails? Mistry did all the time and Mab-Onin used to tell her off.”

“Who are they?”

“It has only been five hundred years, girl!”

“I’m sorry; I’m only seventeen.”

“Your teeth are chattering. Are you cold?”

“Yes.”

“And frightened?”

“Yes.”

“Well go to your house, light your lamps and your fire and we can curl up and chat. Darkness is always frightening. Well, go on then!”

Silvi stood up shakily and walked back to the cottage, wondering if the dragon was creeping along behind her. Yes, the dark could be frightening sometimes, but that was the least of her issues. She lit her lamps, built a fire, and sat on her veranda with a blanket around her shoulders, waiting for the coffee to come back to the boil. With the gentlest of whispers, the dragon landed

softly and curled up with her head close to the ground. Large green-yellow eyes looked at the girl sitting in the flickering firelight.

“What is your name, girl?”

“Silvi.”

“Farthing?” The dragon’s eyes opened wide.

“Yes, how did you know?”

“That is wonderful news! I have been looking for you, but I didn’t think I would find you in quite this way.”

“Why?”

“Well, I was not expecting to see someone attacked where I was about to land for a nap.”

“No, I mean, why were you looking for me?” Silvi was trying to stop her voice shaking, but was not doing very well.

“I have been looking for descendants of Johnson Farthing and Mistry Jinx.”

“Johnson is my great, great ... I don’t know how many, sorry, but a grandfather. Great Father, I suppose. I am not sure who the other person is.”

“Mistry Jinx was his great love, your maternal grandmother, eventually.”

“Oh, I thought that was someone called Silvi, like me.”

“No. Silvi was the daughter of friends of theirs; the Dawfoots. You probably got the name that way somehow.”

“I see. I am sorry, I am confused, but how do you know all this?”

“Silvi, do you know nothing about your family at all?” The dragon sounded concerned and puzzled.

“No, not really. I know Johnson Farthing built a tavern, or at least that’s what they say, and he was one of the first to live on this island, but that’s about it.”

“He was a dragon rider and so was Mistry.”

“He was? Are you sure? I thought dragons lived centuries ago or something and, sorry, they are just stories that my aunt used to tell when I was very young, but she left, maybe died or something.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. You humans live such a short time.”

“We do?” Silvi wasn’t sure she wanted to hear that.

“Silvi, can I start this again?” said Be-Elin too loudly, and the girl flinched backwards in fright. “Sorry, please, Silvi, this is all really important, and I’m getting it wrong!”

“I keep thinking you are going to eat me,” whispered Silvi, pulling her knees up and clutching her legs.

“Oh dear, no. What a thought!” The dragon smacked her lips with genuine distaste. “Do you have any beer? Because I suggest you drink some.”

“Why?”

“Because I am nearly six hundred years old, and Johnson Farthing was my rider, my friend, and a great general.”

Be-Elin talked into the early hours of the morning explaining exactly who Johnson Farthing was, who Mistry was, and generally giving the girl an essential history lesson.

“But I don’t understand, again. I’m sorry,” said Silvi. She had become slowly less frightened, discovering this huge monster was a beautiful creature with a wicked sense of humour, and she was fairly sure some of the stories she had heard were none of her business. “But if the dragons were dying and had to leave, why are you here?”

“The disease has changed, and it is no longer dangerous to us. It’s time we returned. Unfortunately, that is not easy for many reasons.”

“Why not?”

“I cannot explain it yet, it’s too complicated, but I do know that nothing can happen without humans and dragons working together once again.”

“So why are you talking to me? I am just a girl with a few goats and a shed full of cheese.”

“You are a descendant of Farthing and Mistry; it seems a good place to start.”

“After five hundred years, there must be hundreds, thousands!”

“Actually, there are very few. They are all on this island, and I just frightened away two of the less suitable ones, thankfully.”

“Please, Be-Elin. What do you want from me?” The girl was confused and upset, and still a little frightened.

“Silvi, you are the descendant of the greatest dragon rider that ever lived, Mistry Jinx. It might be five hundred years, but I can see her in you.”

“So?”

“So, Silvi Farthing, I want to train you to become my rider.”

Chapter 2 – The Touch of a Dragon

“We can probably continue talking for months, Silvi, and you would know everything about the old world and the history of what is behind the problems in Bind and Preland, but that is not what I am here for.” Be-Elin, who over the last four nights had been trying to be gentle with the girl, sounded irritated.

“The more you tell me, the smaller and more stupid I feel, and I don’t like it,” complained Silvi.

“Well, this is not helping.”

They were sitting outside the small cottage, the dragon in the half gloom lit by the light from the small fire and the two whale oil lamps hung from the posts of the veranda. Be-Elin had insisted that she did not want anyone else to see her, and had been waiting till dusk before turning up each night; a ghostly, shadowy shape, dropping quietly from the sky.

“What should I be doing then?”

“Letting your goats go free would be a start.”

“What? Be-Elin, they are my business! I can’t afford to live without them and my cheese making. Why do I want to let them go?”

“Who will look after them when you are not here?”

“Where would I be going? This is my home!”

“And your brothers?”

“You scared them away.”

“And when they turn up with the rest of your family to hunt down the big scary monster, what then?” Silvi looked shocked, and Be-Elin sighed. “Girl, I need you to think about everything. If it had gone as I intended, I would have found you quietly and discretely, and it would have been very different. But without knowing who you were, when I saw you attacked, I couldn’t just ignore it.”

“Is that what dragons do, then? Fly around saving people?”

“No!” Be-Elin twisted her nose. “Dragons are no more likely to do so than humans are. Most dragons have an aversion to fighting of any kind unless threatened. In the wars we have spoken about, it was only a few hundred dragons out of many thousands that would help; the rest wanted nothing to do with it. Though I do understand their decisions, I am a bit ashamed of some of my kind.”

“So why are you different?” asked Silvi. “Those spears of yours look like weapons, not just for a bit of hunting. I know you talked about the wars in the Eastern Plains.”

“The Draig yr Anialr in the Sand Hills had a long relationship with humans going back hundreds and hundreds of years. When other dragons turned away from humans, refusing to carry them because they did not want to be thought of as inferior beasts of burden, the desert dragons didn’t. We had lived apart from other dragons for a long time, more concerned with

what was happening in our own region, and were not involved with all the politics on Taken Mountain. We never even went there. We had a close association with the nomadic Pharsil-Hin tribes and other humans around Ponack, and we wanted to help our friends. So, we have a long history of fighting with humans against others.”

“Against other dragons too?”

“No, never against dragons. Apart from the odd punch up, dragons have no need to go to war against each other. We don’t have countries, we don’t have borders, we don’t rely heavily on resources like metal, and we don’t suffer from the cold very much so can live anywhere. Although some have archaic beliefs, we have no organised religions either. What would there be to fight over? In all the histories that we know of, we have never even been on different sides of a human conflict, and if that happened, I know that dragons would simply refuse to fight at all. It is just not who we are.”

“I find that hard to understand, Be-Elin. Have there really been no dragon wars?”

“None. And we are wandering away from the problem again, girl. This is what I mean. Sitting here is warm and cosy, and I love talking, but this is not what we should be doing.”

“What then?”

Be-Elin stood up and looked around. “Can your goats and cheese survive two or three days without you?”

“At a push. The goats are not producing milk yet or I would have to be here every day.”

“Then can you join me a few leagues up the coast so we can meet in the daylight without risk of discovery?”

“What for?”

“Please, just do this for me?”

Like many on Hope, Silvi was an excellent rider, but she didn’t often ride Telli since she normally needed the cart too. The horse loved being free of the harness, and she trotted along happily with her ears straight up in the air as they made their way east along the coast. Silvi knew she was taking a risk. She had never left her goats, house or cheese for longer than a day and a night without having Deni or Sarana check on them. Her home was on the far end of the track along which only she ever travelled, and there was nothing on the island that hunted goats, so it should be safe enough. The goats had lots to eat, her cheeses would survive without turning for once, and she was making no more of the small soft goat’s cheeses for a while until she had more milk.

Hope was divided into two distinct areas; the west and the east. The western region was home to the entire population, spread out in a variety of villages and farms between the three towns of Home, Bedonmouth and the capital of Dragon Bay. Although the island basked in the warmest latitudes of Dirt, the widespread Gewil Hills in the west with their thick forests, were the source of three good-sized rivers and many minor rivers, streams, and tributaries. So the larger western end of the island was fertile and verdant, while the eastern end of the island, known as Ceosei, was an arid, stony desert where no one lived.

Silvi rode her pony through the scrub that bordered the two regions. It was not completely devoid of water. There were two or three small, unreliable streams that meandered from the edge of the hills out into the scrub and on towards the sea. It was by the mouth of one of these meagre efforts that Silvi made her camp late in the evening.

“I won’t stay,” said, Be-Elin stepping out from the darkness into the light of the small fire. “You should rest well tonight, and I will return after dawn.”

“What will happen then?”

“You will see, Silvi. Sleep well.” Without another word, the dragon leapt into the night and vanished.

Silvi laid down on her bedroll and looked up at the stars that carpeted the night sky like sparkling dust. She could not shake away the fear that had wrapped around her heart in the last few days. It was not fear of the dragon, for Be-Elin in human form would be no different from Silvi’s friends up the Tennes, but fear of change that was suddenly out of her control. In some ways, it had nothing to do with the arrival of the dragon at all. Her two brothers, Den and Ike, had shown their true colours. Now, rather than just dismiss them as out of touch, Silvi hated them and was scared of what they might do if they returned, and what they would have done if Be-Elin had not intervened.

When she had left home, she had been sneered at by even some of her friends who saw their future lives as a repeat of their parents’ lives. Her father had acceded grudgingly to her request to go out on her own, and had sent her off with his reluctant blessing rather than have her stick to her rights and march off. She knew he thought her ideas ridiculous, and her wish for independence from male control peculiar, but she had been his link to his late wife, and that had softened him towards her sometimes.

The Isle of Hope had adopted a charter in its early years proposed by the first mayor, a man called Eofin of whom nothing much was known. These first islanders had begun with very little; building, surviving and cultivating their new world. With so few of them, dismissing half of the available workforce simply because they were female would have been ridiculous. When they wrote the charter, this equality was enshrined in the law of the island as it was seen to be vital for its health. All these years later and the charter still stood, but many, like her brothers, ignored this central tenet and resorted to believing that men were superior and should be in control. Sadly for them, they could not stop her adopting and owning land that no one else wanted, just like anyone else over sixteen was entitled to do.

Silvi rolled onto her side and pulled the covers over her shoulders. Laws were a fine thing, but her brothers had still tried to hurt her and take away her precious future. And now a dragon had appeared, saved her life, and was insisting that she was somehow important. It was all dragging her even further from her dream of independence.

Morning brought a warm sun with the odd fluffy cloud, and she washed her face in the clear, sparkling stream before taking a breakfast of cheese and bread. Since the dragon’s arrival, Silvi had only seen her in the dusk and dark, and she had no idea what the whole dragon looked like or how big she really was. When Be-Elin spiralled out from the sun and landed a hundred paces away, stretching out her wings and raising her long, graceful neck to the skies, Silvi nearly stopped breathing. It was quite simply the most enthralling sight of her young life. She had not appreciated in the flicker of the evening firelight that though immensely powerful, the dragon was slender and agile. Her mottled brown, sand, and tan skin glistened and shone in the sun, and the light glowed through her wings. Without thinking, Silvi leapt over the tiny stream and ran out to meet the dragon.

“Be-Elin,” she shouted with joy. “You are beautiful!”

The Draig yr Anialr roared at the sky, greeting the sun, and settled in front of the young girl. “Thank you! I can’t think of a better way to be greeted, girl.”

“What is that on your back? Are you are wearing clothes?”

“We dragons don’t wear clothes in the same way as you would for modesty, though why you do has always amused me since some like you are also beautiful. But we sometimes wear

clothes for vanity or, as I do, for protection. These are my hides and made from oother leather. They protect me where my skin is thinner and more vulnerable, but they also make it safer for my rider by giving them straps to hang onto without grabbing me where I do not want to be grabbed!"

Silvi laughed at the very human comment from such an elegant creature. "And what would you wear for vanity?" she asked, curious at such a thought.

"Us Draig yr Anialr only wear simple adornments like decorated leather belts and straps and sometimes leather and wooden beaded chains from our crowns. Some have stitching or carving on their hides depicting stories, but I haven't seen that for many years. Draig Morglas and Draig Awyr, on the other hand, both have a love of fabrics and silks, printed or embroidered, and will wear diaphanous coverings and scarves that flow behind them as they fly. Sky dragons have thin and delicate wings, and silks complement their divine forms."

"You sound like you find them beautiful, Be-Elin," said Silvi with a cheeky smile.

"Oh, I admit it; they can make my heart beat harder!"

Something crossed Silvi's mind, and she looked puzzled.

"What is it, Silvi?"

"I am sorry, but do you have a family? A husband or children?"

"My name, Be-Elin, means that I have no mate for life. If I did, I would call myself Fren-Elin, in the modern tongue. It sort of translates to queen with Bren for the male meaning king, but we are only king and queen of our own lives, not of others. So no, I have never met someone who I wished to spend my whole life with."

"Why?" asked Silvi, worrying she was walking into difficult, personal territory.

"Because I like playing around too much!" replied Be-Elin, laughing. "It is not unusual for both male and female dragons to never find a long-term mate." The dragon leant down close to the girl. "To be honest, I get bored too quickly!" Silvi looked startled. "Sorry, I did not mean to shock you, girl. I know humans sometimes can be very prudish."

"Oh, I am not, not at all, though I am not, well, not, er..."

"Experienced?"

"Yes, that. But I have no intention of marrying in a rush, even once I am ..."

"Experienced?"

"Yes, that again."

"Well, enough of making you blush. Silvi, it's time you climbed on my back and learnt what it is to fly on a dragon."

"Fly?"

"We're not going for a run," said the dragon with a flat voice.

"Oh. No, of course not. So, how?"

"Well, there are all kinds of rituals which I have absolutely no time for. So just climb up onto my wing, move into the middle of my back and lie down, holding on to the straps by my neck. That is not how you will sit later, but is probably the safest for now. This is going to be very awkward."

"Why?"

"I cannot see my own back easily. Normally, another rider would be able to show you what to do, but there are no other riders here so we'll take this slowly."

With guidance, Silvi climbed onto Be-Elin's back and laid down as instructed, holding the two straps near the dragon's neck.

"You are warm!" said Silvi in surprise.

“We are warmer than humans. Feel my neck above the hide.”

Silvi stroked the skin gently. “Oh, it is smooth and warm and... Be-Elin? Are you alright?”

“Hmm? Oh, sorry. I like that; it’s relaxing.” The dragon stood still for a moment. “Now,” she said quickly. “I’m going to walk around for a bit so you can get used to my movement. This will feel strange, I am told, because, and I hate this, I tend to waddle a bit.”

“Oh, I see what you mean!” said Silvi without thinking as the dragon padded around the scrub. “I mean, not that you’re waddling, but it’s strange. Sorry!”

“Thanks, I am sure,” said the dragon, dryly. “Now, how safe do you feel up there?”

“Safer than on a horse, though I am not sure I would always want to be lying down.”

“We will change how you sit later, but I don’t want to drop you.”

“Can that happen?” asked Silvi nervously.

“Sadly, yes, but very rarely. Some of the riders could stand while we were flying, and Mistry used to swing around Mab-Onin’s neck, and once even jumped from him to another dragon in mid-air, but she was rather the exception. I don’t know of any other rider or dragon who was quite that stupid.”

“What about Johnson Farthing?”

“He was a natural rider, but he had less time to enjoy our flights than others. We did have some moments of fun. Dragons and riders will often play together, but when your rider is the general of an army of thousands, finding time is a challenge. And Pree was there too, stealing him away.” Be-Elin blinked fondly at the memory.

“Pree?”

“Oh, didn’t I say? Farthing and Pree were very much in love until she died. He and Mistry fell in love later.”

“You mean my great father was in love with the woman a continent is named after?”

“And she with him. But his love for Mistry was just as strong, and I think it was probably a deeper love.”

“Thank you, Be-Elin.”

“For what?”

“I have wondered who my ancestors were, and especially Johnson Farthing. You are bringing them to life for me.”

“He was a beautiful man, Silvi. I should say that few used his first name and just called him Farthing most of the time.”

The young woman lay on the dragons back and reached up and touched her neck again. Something in her many jumbled thoughts fell into place, and she raised her head. “You loved him, didn’t you?”

The dragon stopped, took a silent breath, and looked over her shoulder. “Yes. Yes, I did. Dragons and their riders always love each other. Not in the way that they would their mates, but it’s deep and intense all the same. Some dragons when they lose their riders, never take another. They will carry other humans, but will not name another rider. Humans have the same problem if they lose their dragon pairing. So yes, I loved Farthing very deeply, and leaving him was the hardest thing I have ever done. But please, I want to enjoy my memories of him. Now to the sky! So hold tight and we will fly.”

Silvi wanted to scream, but that required breathing and for the moment, she had lost that particular ability. She had not yet seen Be-Elin take off because the dragon had always stepped away from the cottage and into the darkness first. It was an experience both simpler than she had imagined and far more exhilarating. Be-Elin ducked down, leant forward, raised her wings high

above her and then leapt forward into the air while bringing her massive wings back down towards the ground, trapping the air beneath them. Silvi felt momentarily feather-light and then heavy as a rock as the powerful Draig yr Anialr pushed up underneath her, soared up and over the arid land, and out across the ocean.

The wind rushed over Silvi's body, and she gripped the straps tightly, lying as flat as possible, her cheek pressed into the soft, fine oothen hairs of the hides. She was almost panting with excitement; the rush and thrill flowing through every fibre of her body while her heart raced. It was an elemental and primeval joy, and she knew at once she wanted more.

"Still breathing?" the dragon called over her shoulder, laughing.

"Yes! Oh, Be-Elin!"

"Hold tight. We will go higher, and then you can sit up." They were flying low and fast, gliding over the sea, and now the dragon lifted her head and beat her wings with long, powerful strokes, taking them higher and higher.

"How high can you go?" asked Silvi, shouting over the noise of the wind washing over them both.

"Higher than you can breathe, dear one. I have so missed this!" The dragon roared and flew higher still, then levelled out, gliding out farther over the ocean and turned towards the land.

"Where are we going?" asked Silvi, unable to see properly from where she was lying.

"No one can see us out here. Your small fishing boats do not fish in these waters because the currents are too strong for them, I have noticed, so we can play as we wish. Now, sit up, girl. Hold the two straps in the middle of my hides and sit with the straps between your knees and with your legs curled back to the sides. You are quite safe, but move slowly; there is no rush."

Silvi slid back slightly until she found the straps and then drew her legs up and around till she was sitting like she would on a very wide horse, but with her feet curled back.

"Oh, the gods!" she said in shock, looking around. "How high are we? I can see half the island!"

"Four of five thousand feet? We will be able to fly higher eventually, but not yet. How are you feeling?"

"I don't know. Incredible?" Silvi shook her hair away from her face. "I should have tied my hair up better!"

"You will be able to fly without holding on with your hands very soon if we keep flying and then you can sort out your hair even up here."

"If we keep flying?"

"That is up to you, girl. You have to want this; I can only show you."

"I, I don't know, Be-Elin. I am so confused."

"Just enjoy it, young one. Enjoy the sky and the air and the birds and me, and then we can talk."

They flew for nearly four hours, then glided over the camp a short distance from Silvi's horse who had wandered off out of boredom. Be-Elin landed as if stepping gently from a low rock onto the sand. Silvi leant forward and touched the great dragon on the neck instinctively, and Be-Elin smiled privately.

"Now what, Be-Elin?"

"It's lunchtime, girl, so you should eat and see to your horse. I will return later and we will fly more."

"And after that?"

“Then I will leave you to sleep and return to your goats. Tomorrow evening, I will come to the cottage and we will talk again. Now, slide off my wing. I must fly to my own camp for an hour and rest.” The dragon leant down, and Silvi slipped from Be-Elin and landed lightly on the ground. The beautiful desert dragon turned away and leapt into the air, flying straight up into the sun.

Silvi fed Telli some oats then took a little bread with cheese and olive oil and sat by the stream, cooling her toes. The morning had left her thrilled and excited beyond belief, and feeling warm inside, but she was also scared and confused. Her young life had been stifled by her father’s and brothers’ limited view of the world. Leaving her family and building a new life had been hard work but vitally important to her. She was immensely proud of her year and a day, and she loved her friends, the people she dealt with in the village of Bay, and her animals and lifestyle. Now it was all turned upside down. She had been shown something that she had not imagined could exist and she now craved, but it did not fit into her life as she imagined it. Had her goats been in milk, she could not have come out along the coast since they would need milking at least once a day and checked regularly. With fresh milk came more of the soft cheeses that were so popular, and those took much more care and attention than the long-matured hard cheeses that filled her shed to the roof. It was all too much, and she lay on the ground and swore a lot.

When Be-Elin returned, they took shorter flights so Silvi could learn more about landing and taking off, understand where she could sit safely, where would be annoying or restricting for the dragon, and to just build up her confidence. It was a tentative start to how to be a rider, but during the afternoon, the nervous giggles turned to laughs of glee. Silvi felt herself growing closer to her new, powerful friend, and began to enjoy playing.

“One more flight, girl,” Be-Elin said and lowered her wing so Silvi could hop up onto her back.

“What this time?”

“This is just for fun, but you must hold on as tightly as possible.” The dragon took two steps forward and launched herself into the air, flying low over the ground. “Lie down again, holding the front straps like you did on our first flight, but tuck your arms underneath your body so your head is raised. Slip your feet under the straps behind you.”

“Alright. Now, what?”

“Just hang on!”

The dragon flew almost vertically into the sky, her wings pounding up and down with long strokes. Silvi realised she was holding her breath, wondering whether she was going to fall off the dragons back. Then, without warning, the dragon flapped her wings forward, all but stopping in the air then flipped over backwards and plummeted towards the ground, her wings pulled in close to her body. Silvi screamed, watching the water rush towards her faster and faster. Was the dragon about to dive in the water? How could she ever stop? Be-Elin pushed her wings out slowly, taking control of the air around them, and then snapped them out wide. Silvi felt herself triple in weight as the magnificent beast pulled out of the dive, the girl flattened against her back.

Now they were flying just above the waves at an incredible speed, the wind roaring around them. Even screaming was impossible. Silvi lifted her head again. The dragon’s wings were out straight and flat, the wingtips pointing down and almost skimming the water. Then Be-Elin changed the angle of her wings once more, and they soared back into the sky, turned, and gently glided back to the shore. When they landed, Silvi jumped from the dragon’s back, ran to the sandy beach, and dived into the water, laughing and whooping for joy. Every muscle in her body

ached and she was exhausted, but when she ran back to Be-Elin and threw herself into the dragon's arms, she believed she had been truly touched by the legendary creature.

Silvi lay against Be-Elin near her little fire, stroking the desert dragon's leg idly. Her heart was stuffed to brimming with emotions, and she did not know what to think or say, let alone do.

"Do you have to leave tonight? Can you not stay with me?"

"I will stay until you fall asleep, Silvi. But tomorrow you must decide what to do for yourself."

"What do I have to decide?"

"You have the worst of choices, I'm afraid, and I wish it were not so. We dragons are not part of this world as we should be, and I don't know how we'll be received or if we'll be accepted again. This island is a small peaceful sanctuary, but where I and my kind are needed is out there to the north, not here. Where I was born, children first climbed on to dragons and played with them when just three years old. And young dragons who were yet to fly and young humans would play together like all children do, despite a big difference in size. The choice of riding was part of the community, how we were all brought up, and some did, and some did not and it was all accepted. But that was five hundred years ago and hundreds of leagues away. If you decide that your future is here, then I will leave. If you decide that your future is with me, then we will leave together. I do not know when or if we will return."

"That is an impossible choice, Be-Elin."

"I know, girl." Be-Elin stroked Silvi's hair. "Mistry, Farthing, Pree, and all the others, they all faced similar difficult choices. What made them so special was that they took the decision they knew in their hearts they had to take. All I ask is that you choose honestly. Now, go to sleep and tomorrow night I will come to your cottage."

Silvi rode back along the coast far slower than she knew she should. Her little goats would be impatient and she had two shelves of cheeses that she was still turning. In a few months, she would have new kids, the mother goats would need milking daily, and the cycle of her life would reassert itself. She did not fear the work or regret her life; it had been her choice. Keeping goats and making cheese, as Be-Elin had told her, was something of a family tradition. Mistry had grown up with goats, Farthing's sister had kept goats, and Mistry and Farthing together had had a goat farm on both the mainland and on this island. Mistry had even kept goats in the middle of the war. Perhaps keeping goats was in her blood. But that had not been why she had left her family or why she had not visited Ten Bay or her father for a year.

From the age of twelve, Silvi had known there was a growing gulf between her and her family and even between her and her friends and their families. The Isle of Hope was a safe and happy environment. People had to work hard to survive here, but it was not against impossible odds. The weather was warm all year, though the storm season could be severe, the land was fertile, wood was plentiful, and the mountains were a source of copper which had provided the island with a steady, though not huge income. If you wished to become wealthy, then this was the wrong place to live. If you wanted stability and security for your family, then with much of the rest of Dirt unsettled, it was perfect. But what if you wanted something in between? What if you were the young woman who asked questions about ancient ancestors that everyone else couldn't give a damn about? What if you wanted adventure?

The goat farm was Silvi's adventure. That was why it had been so important that she do it on her own. Deni and Sarana were madly in love with each other, and their small farm was all

about sharing, but that was not for Silvi. She wanted to be able to say, "I did that!" Now, a fairy-tale beast that she only knew from the handful of stories told by her aunt when little, had flown into her life and said the world was in a mess and she needed a rider. Then the creature had given her a day of excitement so extreme that Silvi had feared she would pass out from pure joy. It was as unfair as it was unbelievable. She now felt torn two ways between her never-ending wish for something new and different, and the simple pleasure of the cheese and goat life that she had settled with.

Before she even arrived at her farm, Silvi knew her choice had been made for her. She screamed and kicked her horse into a gallop, watching in horror the smoke drifting up from the charred remains of her shed and her tiny house.

"You bastards!" she shouted at her brothers, leaping from the horse. "You complete, utter bastards!"

"Shut up and grab your things, Silvi; you are coming home, now." Den sneered at her.

"Get off my land, you shit!" Gone was the frightened girl of before. Silvi picked up a length of wood and smashed Den around the shoulder, sending the stocky fisherman onto his back. "Get out!" she shouted again, aiming a blow at Ike, who stepped backwards in shock.

"Grab her Ike!" shouted Den, staggering to his feet.

"But what if that monster returns?"

"Don't be stupid, Ike. That was booze and shadows, you drunkard. Grab her."

"Touch me, Ike, and I swear I will kill you!"

"Yeah, a little girl like you?" he sneered, and then shouted in pain when Silvi swung the wood at his legs, cracking him across the knee.

"Get out, get out, get out! You sodding, crappy, shits!"

Den staggered to his feet. "Get up, Ike!"

"My leg!"

"Come on, get up!"

Silvi swung at Den, who staggered back, still holding his arm.

"Get up, Ike!" yelled Den again. The younger brother pulled himself to his feet and limped to their horse and cart. Silvi followed them, pain and anger and hatred in her eyes.

"We will be back, Silvi," shouted Den, pulling himself up next to Ike. "This is a small island, and we will hunt you down. You are dead, kid. Trust me."

"Come near me again, Den, and I will kill you. That I swear!"

As the brothers whipped their horse into action, Silvi threw the length of wood, and it clattered against the backboard of the cart.

Silvi turned to her small home. The shed with her cheeses was ruined, the door of her house had been kicked in and her clothes scattered on the ground outside. When she climbed over the fence to her paddock, she fell to her knees and sobbed. Three of her goats lay dead, and the others had fled across the scrub. It was all destroyed; her dream crushed. She had sweated for hour after hour over the last year to build the shed, put a roof on her house, put up the fence, make her meagre furniture, and create her future. No one had helped. She had walked her first few goats to the farm, and had taken her first cheeses on foot to sell in Bay, using the money she raised to buy a broken down cart which needed repair. A year later and she had no spare money at all, but she had no debts, everything was paid for, and she had hammered every nail in herself and dug every post hole. She had done far more than any of her brothers had ever done on their own, and now it was a smoking ruin. Dead. Finished.

When Be-Elin arrived at dusk, she had to go in search of the girl. She found her halfway back to the stream where they had been flying, sitting on the ground with a single bag of clothes by her side.

“What happened?” demanded Be-Elin. The girl sat silently, tear stains running down her cheeks, anger in her eyes. “Silvi!” snapped Be-Elin. The girl flinched. “Tell me what happened?”

“My brothers. They burnt it all down and killed my goats or some of them. I attacked them and drove them off, but they will come back. They want to kill me, and I want to kill them.”

“Oh, girl.” The dragon looked down at the young woman, small and vulnerable, her arms clasped around her knees. “Where is everything else? Your horse?”

“I’ve let her go. She will find her way to Deni and Sarana, she’s done that before.”

“And where were you going?”

Silvi shut her eyes tightly, fresh tears squeezing out from between her eyelids. “I was coming to find you. I couldn’t stay there.” She looked up at the dragon. “Be-Elin, I know so little about you, about dragons. You have filled my head with ideas and names and places that I have never heard of and do not understand. And you have given me an experience I would not believe I could ever have had. But still, I don’t really know you, and right now, I need a friend.”

Be-Elin lowered her beautiful head down to the small woman and gently touched her face with the side of her nose. “I will be your friend.”

Although Silvi had wanted to fly away that night, Be-Elin insisted she catch her horse, ride to her friends Deni and Sarana, tell them what had happened, and take some comfort from them. Silvi told her friends that she would be leaving in the early morning to hike the twenty-five leagues across the hills to Dragon Bay. The two young women gave her a knife, fishing line, hooks, and some provisions in a backpack, and in exchange she gave them her pony and made them promise to tell no one where she had gone. At dawn, while the two women still slept, Silvi crept from the house, ran across the fields to a small wood, and climbed on Be-Elin’s back.

Be-Elin had not known how long it would take her to find who she was looking for. So, she had built a dragon house with stolen tree trunks on the flank of the small, rocky hills that rose from the desert at the eastern end of the island. No one came to this part of the Isle of Hope ever. It was fifty leagues from the nearest decent land and the exposed, rocky coast where the currents were unpredictable offered no haven for the islander’s small boats. Yet even here, a stream made its way down the hillside, flowing over ledges and slopes, leaving in its wake enough goodness for grass, a few small trees and bushes, and even some flowers to grow along its banks. It was a tiny world, hidden from the islanders, and for now, it would do as a sanctuary for both the dragon and the girl.

“Can I wash in the stream?” Silvi was tired and worn down to nothing.

“There is a pool just above those rocks where I sit sometimes. You can bathe there.” The dragon hopped lightly up to the higher rocks and Silvi scrambled up behind. “It is pleasantly warm,” said the dragon, laying down on her side and curling up, her head resting on a rock. Silvi had assumed that this would be a private wash, but then, Be-Elin was a girl and a dragon, so she stripped off and slipped into the pool. The dragon watched for a few minutes then closed her eyes, dozing in the midday sunshine.

“What will I do now, Be-Elin?” Silvi squeezed her hair dry then sat on the warm grass looking up at the dragon.

“Get dry?” suggested the dragon, chuckling.

"I'm not sure I remembered a towel with everything else. Shit."

"When you are more confident, you can jump on my back and dry yourself in the wind of flying, but I am not sure that you naked and wet is such a good idea. You would slide off like a fish."

Silvi giggled despite her aching heart and moved over to lean against the dragon's side. "You even feel warm on a sunny day, Be-Elin."

The dragon reached over with her strong hand and brushed the girl's cheek. "I will always try to be especially warm for you, small one."

"I knew I would not stay forever in that cottage, I knew it was only a beginning, but I needed time, Be-Elin."

"Call me Elin, Silvi. Friends do not need to be so formal."

"Thank you." Silvi snuggled in closer, putting her face and hand against the smooth skin and listening to the slow beat of Be-Elin's heart. She shivered.

"Are you cold?" The dragon pulled her legs around protectively.

"No, just frightened." The girl's voice sounded small, even to her. "I am going to miss Deni and Sarana. They are absolutely mad, and the affair they are having puts men's noses out of joint, but they are so loving. I know you said Mistry and Farthing were loving and kind, and you told me about Silvi's family, Melini and Seb, but it hasn't lasted. My brothers and father were sometimes rough with me, but never violent like today. I don't think Den and Ike ever liked me particularly, and I didn't see much love when I was young. Deni and Sarana were a shock. They were so nice, warm, and friendly. Lots of hugs involved and I always left their house feeling there was love in the world. I did this morning, too. Now I'm going away. Will I find people who can love me? I am not talking about romance or a handsome man or something, but just a loving friendship. I wish I'd had more of that when I was growing up, but the other families around the harbour didn't like my family very much." Silvi lay down on her back on the grass and stroked the dragon's skin with the back of her hand. Be-Elin said nothing and just let the girl take the moment wherever she wished.

"I don't really remember my mother. I think she was kind, but she was not well, and she was often too ill to hug me. I used to try to hug my father when I was very little, but it was always awkward, and he was relieved when the hug ended. Most of the time he was drunk and forgot I was there. I had this sort of aunt who turned up a couple of times. She was nice, but that was only when I was small. The rest of the time I spent with other kids around Ten Bay. Their mums were friendly, and they would feed me and everything else I needed, but they didn't love me. Sorry, this sounds foolish and precious."

"No, Silvi. Just honest. Dragons like honesty. We do not hide things well."

"You do not lie?"

"It does not come easily to us."

"That sounds very special, I think, Elin." The sun was growing warmer, and Silvi moved from the dragon so she was out of the shade. "I promised myself I would get brown from nose to toes this year," said the girl. "My little house was private enough for that. I didn't think I would do it while being watched by a dragon."

"That would require the dragon's eyes to be open."

"Sorry, I will let you sleep."

"No, I am not sleeping, but I am enjoying your company."

"When dragons are young, do their parents love them?" asked Silvi. "I'm sorry, but I don't even know how you are born."

"We are born kicking and objecting as you are, and yes, our parents love us. We do not build long-lasting bonds with our parents like you do. Dragon lives are different to humans. Our minds mature quite quickly when we are young, and we crave independence early, but we cannot fly until we are fully-grown physically, which can be as late as thirty years old. Our mental childhood is over by the time we are twelve or thirteen perhaps, but we are reliant on adults for many more years. It can be difficult for some."

"Was it for you?"

"No, I was lucky. I'm from a large family, and my mother loved to fuss over everyone. She was a bit unusual, was Fren-Otina. It was fun much the time. I also learned to fly when I was twenty, which is very early. I am smaller than some, which may have helped."

"You are small?"

"Well, I suppose. Sea dragons are bigger than us, just a bit, and some of the red dragons are huge; three times my size."

"Really?"

"Silvi, you are a most beautiful person, and I like having you on my back, but I wasn't planning on you being here because you were driven away by your family. You still have a choice, I think. You can stay here, if you can find a way, or I can take you anywhere across Bind or even Preland if you want to start afresh somewhere. I can even give you coin to help get you started. Or you can come with me. But you need to make a choice."

The girl stood up and tied up her long, blonde hair with a string. "Be-Elin, I am dry now. Can we fly for a while, out there across the ocean so I can think?"

Be-Elin stood and lowered her wing and the girl climbed carefully onto the dragon's smooth back and lay down, taking hold of two straps the dragon threw across her shoulders. Feeling the warm, comforting skin against her own, Silvi closed her eyes as the dragon leapt into the air. She did not speak or sit up while the dragon flew through the blue sky, but just felt the strong muscles ripple against her, and let the slow rumble of the dragon's breathing ease her mind. When they landed, the girl slid down smoothly, walked to Be-Elin's lowered head and instinctively touched her on the cheek.

"Be-Elin, will you teach me to become your rider?"

"Oh, now that was noisier than I thought it would be!"

"Stinks down here. Dark, too."

"What do you care? I wonder what died down here?"

"I am more worried about when."

"Ow. This rubble has sharp corners. Hang on, better get this lamp lit or I won't see a thing."

"Stone looks older than back up the passage."

"How can stone look older?"

"I mean the way it is cut. Certainly not Haftien."

"Earlier or later?"

"Not sure. It is much simpler, so might be earlier. The floor is very smooth; well worn down."

"A lot of people must have walked down here at one time."

"Or one person a lot."

"Mind your head."

"Idiot! It's not my head."

"Oh, yeah. Hey, there are carvings on the wall down here. Come on, catch up, old man!"

"People with wings, praying. Looks like church rubbish."

"Something odd about the faces."

"Oh, I see what you mean. Definitely not angelic. Oran Helting wouldn't have approved at all."

"Well, what are they then? Not dragons, either. Their mouths are human."

"They look more symbolic than something real. Like they are a mix of things. Keep looking."

Chapter 3 – Lessons in Bind

“Damn it Be-Elin, I need to rest!”

“You have to get stronger, girl.”

“I am strong!”

Be-Elin flicked her tail and sent Silvi flying onto her back. “No, you are soft and slow!”

“Oh, thanks, damn you. I’m sore all over, and now I have hurt my arm!” Silvi was close to breaking point.

“If you were fitter, you would have been fine.”

“Why are you pushing so hard?”

“Look, blondie, I am five hundred and ninety years old, and I am half the strength I used to be. But I am flying four or five hours a day and getting stronger again. What are you doing? Apart from lying on my back getting a tan?”

“I said I wanted to become your rider, not run the length of Bind!” snapped Silvi.

“Why do you think your ancestor Mistry was so bloody good, girl? How do you think she could stand on Mab-Onin’s back, shooting arrow after arrow after arrow without falling off or getting tired? A bit of luck, maybe? Had a good day, perhaps?” Be-Elin glowered at Silvi.

“Well, I don’t know. You make her sound like some sort of god!”

“She was, you idiot! To us, she was a hero! But it was only because she used to run leagues, practice hour after hour, and train on horseback or with Mab-Onin and even with other dragons. She never stopped. That is how you become a rider. Not stripping off and waving your belly at the sun!” Be-Elin turned, shot into the sky, and vanished.

“Shit!” Silvi sat up and put her forehead on her knees. “You stupid cow, Silvi!” she shouted to herself.

Three weeks they had been at this. They had spent a week at their little, hidden camp on the Isle of Hope while Silvi found her balance better on Be-Elin. Then the dragon had dropped her off in the very early morning to buy provisions in Dragon Bay before the two had started the flight across the sea to Bind and to the abandoned dragon village in the Seven Beacons, just north of Fallen Hills.

“And where the bloody hell am I?” Silvi looked up at the sky, but Be-Elin had long gone. She would have to retrace her steps back to the camp. “Damn that dragon and damn me too!” Silvi jumped up, groaning at her aching legs, and marched off back down the trail. “Well, it was only three leagues; three leagues!” The small and getting smaller girl jumped over a log and ducked under a branch. “And I’m bloody hungry!”

Silvi had discovered some rather large holes in Be-Elin’s plans when it came to young female goat farmers from the Isle of Hope. To start with, Silvi was not an expert in surviving night after night in the woods. She was not super strong, she was not as tough as baby dragons or army generals, and she didn’t know how to skin a rabbit or forage safely for berries and

mushrooms. None of which would be a major problem, except Be-Elin didn't know how to do any of it either. Silvi was not eating properly and she was tired. By the time she made it back to camp, she was also collecting scratches from running through the pine woods.

"Look, I know I have to work hard, I know I have far to go before getting anywhere near close to Mistry and Farthing, but I am tired. I have to eat." She slumped down by the ashes of their fire and started making it up.

"I know you do," said Be-Elin quietly, from where she was lying at the edge of the camp.

She hated arguing with the girl, and she knew she was messing it up. The dragon had been spoilt when she named Farthing as her rider. Although his only experience had been flying on Fren-Eirol, he was unusually strong and naturally athletic, and just understood things about how Be-Elin flew that others took months to learn. Even Mistry, who had been ten times the rider Farthing had been, and could arguably beat anyone hand-to-hand, could not lay a finger on him when they sparred; he was just too strong and fast. This girl, Silvi, was neither Farthing nor Mistry, but she was young, she was strong, and she seemed to have a natural affinity with Be-Elin. How to turn that into a rider without another human to help was something else entirely.

"I think we should leave the training for a bit," said Be-Elin. "There is more we need to learn than just you working with me."

"Like what?" asked Silvi, moodily.

"Like what is going on out there in the villages and towns. That is something only you can do."

"How do I do it? Just walk in and talk to people?" Silvi was still angry.

Be-Elin stared at the young girl. "As good as way as any! You need food, you need other supplies, which gives you a reason to be there, you are friendly, and people like you. Sounds to me like you have everything to get what we want."

"I don't know. It might be dangerous, and you won't be there, will you. That is the whole reason why we are up in these hills; so no one sees you."

"I don't know what else to suggest, Silvi!"

"Maybe you should have picked someone older that already knows this stuff."

"There is no one! The last rider living on Bind died more than four centuries ago! I have had to pick someone who is young enough to learn quickly, will understand me, and who I can trust."

"And is stupid, weak and useless!"

"No, you are not, girl! Just bloody stubborn."

"What do you expect? Walk into a town on my own, smile and wait to see which nasty git jumps me?"

"Well, no," conceded Be-Elin. "Perhaps not a town then. A village. A small one with a tavern and a shop."

"Still dangerous."

"The entire world is dangerous!" retorted the dragon. "Look, there is a small village down on the plain. We know it's quiet around here, so it's probably as safe as it gets. We are almost out of provisions for you anyway, so you will have to buy from somewhere. Might as well be there."

"But what do I do? What do I say?" Silvi knew the dragon was right and she could not hide up in the hills forever. In many ways, she was still hiding from her brothers, and they were more than two hundred leagues away on an island.

“You have your pack, so just dress up as if you are travelling like most of the people who can’t afford to own a horse. Then walk into the village and buy a few bits from the shop. If you are unhappy, just walk out of the village again, and we will meet up and wait until dusk before we fly out of there. If you think it’s safe enough, go to the tavern, have a couple of beers, and talk to one or two people. And then leave the tavern and the village before nightfall. If that works, then we find another village and do the same thing. We can do a week of this, finding out what we can, then move on and spend another week training.” Be-Elin studied the girl to see what her reaction would be.

“So, if I am feeling unsafe, just buy a few things and leave straight away?” Silvi looked at the dragon out of one eye.

“Yes. If the village has a tavern, you can buy lunch there. There may be a couple of locals around and one or two travellers, but it will be quieter than later in the day. When they went off on some of their little trips, Farthing and Weasel sometimes preferred lunchtime to the evening for gathering information.”

“What trips?”

“Just to find out what was going on, what people were thinking or who was in charge of what. Being a general is not all big battles. Somewhere along the line, you have to understand who you are fighting or you make mistakes.”

“Alright, I will try. If nothing else, I hope they sell some decent food!”

Feathen, the village at the north-eastern foot of the Seven Beacons, was similar in size to Bay on the Isle of Hope. Be-Elin had told Silvi to say she was travelling from Fenn in the west and was on her way to Long Valley to meet her husband. That was a long journey of several weeks for someone on foot, but not unknown in a land where many could not afford a horse. They were worried that someone might question why a young woman was travelling on her own. In some places, it might not be thought odd, and in others it might be considered close to a sin. Be-Elin’s knowledge, after all, was five hundred years out of date.

“Morning!” The woman who was sweeping the floor of the small general store seemed friendly enough, and Silvi smiled.

“Good morning. I am looking for some dried beans, fat, and some biscuits, if you have any,” said Silvi. “Oh, and some onions.”

“Got all of that, girl,” said the woman. “Travelling far?”

“A fair way, yes. Actually, you might be able to help me. Which are the best roads up to Long Valley?”

“Are you on foot or riding?” asked the woman.

Since she was wearing a pack, Silvi thought the answer was obvious, but conversation was conversation, and that was what Be-Elin wanted her to have.

“On foot, sadly.”

“Well, it’s much the same, to be honest. Two roads lead up that way, and both wander around a bit, but if you are on foot and on your own, I would take the western of the two roads.”

“Is that easier?”

“It’s longer, but not wide enough for a wagon, and there have been troubles on the main road.”

“What sort of troubles? Sorry, I am on my way from the west, and I don’t know this area at all.”

“Why are you travelling?”

"My man. He took some work up in the vineyards in Long Valley; I'm going to join him."

"Have you heard from him, then?"

"No, I haven't. I had to stay to look after my sister for a bit cos she was near her time."

"Well, they have had problems with their king up there in the last few months, so I don't know what is happening up on the hill farms. You might be walking into trouble."

"Seems to be what my life is all about," commented Silvi. "One trouble tripping into the next. This is a peaceful place."

"We've been lucky down here," said the woman, putting down her broom and walking behind the counter. "We get some travelling through but few stop here. The odd one for lunch but most of the travellers stop the night farther up the road. It's just how it works out. So, we are not of much interest to some of the barons."

"Can I have three scoops of the dried red beans and three of the white, please? Barons?"

"Well, that's what they call themselves. Nothing more than thieves really. You want the white or the golden onions. Sorry, I haven't any reds, and we can't get the seeds now."

"Oh, pity, I like those. The golden ones will be okay. You got any garlic?"

"A bit of smoked from last season."

"Just a half bulb; I need to watch my coin. So, who do you pay taxes to if there are these barons everywhere?"

"We are meant to pay them to the Laird at Fallen Hills, but there been some trouble there too and we ain't see no collectors for a year or more. Someone will be along and demanding soon enough, they always are."

"That's the truth," said Silvi with feeling. If she had stayed on the island, she would have had to pay her first year's taxes in the next month, and that would have emptied her savings. Her brothers had taken her coin, of course.

"Duck or pork fat?"

"Duck. You got any salt?"

"Not cheap, girl," said the woman. "I can do you a small fold if you like."

"That will be enough. Only little me eating," said Silvi with a grin.

"I got some salted biscuits going cheap if you are interested," suggested the woman, taking a wooden box from the shelf behind her. "They got broken, but they are good enough to eat. Better soaked in a bit of stock if you want to keep your teeth, but they'll fill you up good."

"Sounds perfect. I have been losing weight on this walk, and there was me thinking I had worked hard before!"

"Well, you are only young, girl."

"Twenty-three next spring!" lied Silvi. She had decided for herself that being seventeen would raise eyebrows, and after the punishment she had received during training, she reckoned she was looking a bit rougher around the gills.

"That is still young enough to me." The woman, who was probably in her late forties, grinned. "Is that everything?"

"Yeah, I think so. I have been foraging for the rest to save me lugging it around. I saw the tavern up the way. Do they serve food?"

"Cheese and smoked pork most days. Lots of pigs around here and some of them are actually animals too!"

Silvi paid the woman, bid her well, and walked up the lane to the tavern.

The Old Sow was, as Silvi had yet to discover, like most village taverns in the south of Bind. When her ancestor Johnson Farthing had built The Pub by The Waters in tribute to the hostelry

of the same name owned by the Jippersons, he had built it in the style of the original on the Isle of Taken. Dark brick, heavy dark stained beams, small leaded windows and a lot of polished dark wood inside. But then Farthing, Silvi had learned, had coin that others did not. The tavern in Feathen Village, on the other hand, was a simple, wooden building with a veranda, large, shuttered windows, and just a common room with a counter.

“Pork plate and beer?” asked the round landlord who was sorting his shelves.

“Please, sir,” said Silvi, taking her pack from her back.

“Sit yourself down by the window. I will open more shutters to let the air in.”

It was only just lunchtime, but there were a couple of older men sitting up at the counter and two much older women at the table next to where Silvi sat on a bench to await her food. Her stomach growled in expectation.

“You look like you could do with feeding, girl,” said one of the women, chuckling.

“Been on the road for weeks and I am starving,” said Silvi with an embarrassed laugh. “I am not the best hunter out, to be honest.”

“Takes a bit of practice to get that right,” said the woman. “My name is Jani, dear, and this is Farna.”

“I’m Silvi Goatherd,” said Silvi, trying to keep a straight face. Be-Elin had told her about Farthing’s silly pseudonym, but she had no idea why she had just used it; it just jumped into her head as she spoke.

“Jani is right, it does take practice and some knowledge,” said Farna. “Have you been travelling much?”

“Only this one time, but it’s been a long walk.”

“Well, me and my old Bill we spent half our lives travelling up and down on foot, pony, or wagon, and we were never short of nothing.”

“I must be getting something wrong, Farna,” said Silvi. “I’ve been nervous about stepping into some villages on my own, but I had to stop today and buy some bits, I was getting hungry.”

“I don’t blame you, girl,” said Jani. “The towns are rough these days and even some of the big villages. The smaller ones on the road here are alright, mostly, but don’t stay over in them.”

“Why not?”

“Well, we get bands of armed men coming through a lot. They don’t stop during the day, but if it’s night, they will take over the local inn, if the village has one, or camp just outside. They can be right trouble. You’re a pretty thing; you stay clear of them.”

“Who are they? The woman over in the shop said I should stick to the western road going north.”

“She’s right too. We get highwaymen up on the main road raiding the less well guarded wagons, but they don’t bother with the old track because you can’t get wagons up there.”

“Here you go, miss.” The round landlord put a plate of smoked pork, bread and pickles on her table and a lidded pot of wheat beer. “You watch these two, girl. They will have your ears fair burnt off with their chatter, they will!” The man laughed, rolling back to his counter.

“You in a rush, dear?” asked Farna.

“Not particularly. I want to get in a couple more leagues today if I can.”

“Well, you enjoy your beer, and we will tell you everything we know about living on the road, won’t we Jani?”

“Course. Nice to talk to someone who is not about to puke on you.”

When Silvi left the tavern two hours later, her head filled with all the women's advice about life on the road, she decided to pop back into the shop.

"Hello again," she said to the woman who was cleaning her long counter. "Do you sell paper and ink or writing leads?"

"Leads we do and some coarse paper. A couple of coins, though."

"I can just stretch to it. I had my ears bent by a pair of women at the tavern, but they told me some useful stuff, and I want to write it down."

"Oh, that will be Jani and Farna at this time of day. Nothing much they don't know about between them. If they have given you advice, it's probably good." The woman dug around under the counter and found a lead and a small notebook of course paper bound together with a leather thread. "Will this do you?"

"Perfect! So, take the back road?"

"That's right. When you leave the village going north, there is a small bridge over a stream. The main track goes straight on, but you will see a narrow trail next to the stream that doesn't look like it will go anywhere. It's what the locals use, and once you walk down a little way, you will see where it turns up north."

"Thanks, again!"

Silvi left the village and trotted to the north where a dragon waited to whom she owed an apology.

"What is the notebook for?"

Be-Elin and Silvi had waited for the cover of dusk and had then flown back to their camp in the beacons. Silvi was sitting by the fire, a pot of red beans bubbling away and two small brown fish stuck on sticks ready to grill, thanks to the stream and Jani teaching her how to use her hook and line properly.

"I need to write down some bits before I forget," replied Silvi. "Asking these questions is fine, but a waste of time if I can't remember the answers." She carried on scribbling and then sat back. "How long were you over here before you found me?" she asked the dragon.

"A couple of months or so. I had to fly all the way from the far west of Preland, which is a long way even for a dragon. I went up north first before I decided to come down south to Hope."

"Why north?"

"I wasn't sure if any riders had returned to my old town of Ponack and perhaps their descendants still had the old way of life, but it is so very long ago. I also wanted to look around. I know I haven't been able to talk to people, for obvious reasons, but even from the air, I get the sense that everything has gone backwards."

"What do you mean?" asked Silvi.

"I have much better long sight than you, and even when I am flying high enough so I am not noticed I can still see the ground clearly if it's a bright day. Now, I am not saying I see everything, but I was watching the boats when I crossed the Yonder Sea, and there were none of the big traders I remember, just little coastal vessels. Also, the towns seem to have fewer people, and there are lots of places that are just ruined or vanished completely. It's like everything has shrunk."

"I know it is only one village, but Feathen is much poorer than anything on Hope," said Silvi. "Or, at least, not as well kept."

"Hope is a beautiful island, Silvi. You are lucky to have been born there."

“Well, if Farthing and Mistry chose it, they chose it because it was good for them. Most people don’t get to choose where they live. I tried.”

“I know,” said the dragon. “I am sorry I am pushing you so hard, Silvi. I forget that at least part of why you are here is because of your brothers.”

“I don’t want it to be the reason, Elin. I want to be here because I just want to be, or for a more important reason of some sort.” Silvi stirred her beans and put her two fish over the glowing embers. “I need to buy some smoked ham, I think, and some fruit.”

“Why didn’t you buy it today?” Be-Elin had been hunting while Silvi was in the village and had a pleasantly full belly.

“I wanted to leave something to buy tomorrow.”

“Are we going again, then?” The dragon raised an eyebrow.

“Yes. And sorry. Again.”

“Forgiven. Now, I am going to sleep off my lunch!”

Although Silvi had the luxury of Be-Elin flying her between villages rather than having to hike, it was still a slow process. The dragon would fly into a nearby wood in the early hours so she was not seen, and then Silvi would wait and walk into the village at lunchtime. After she had found out what she could, she would return to meet up with Be-Elin and they would wait until dusk before returning to camp. In five days, they had tried five small villages, and each had told a similar story; local robber barons were controlling the area and making trading near impossible. The last village she visited before they found a new camp and resumed training was near Long Valley and was over the border in a small kingdom called Senness.

Mellorn was bigger than any of the other villages and Silvi guessed it had a population of five or six hundred. Though it was as busy as Bay or the much larger fishing village of Ten Bay, it did not have the same light spirit or friendliness. But then, it was not next to a warm ocean, and it was raining and windy. Silvi pulled the broad-brimmed hat she had bought in the previous village firmly onto her head, and marched miserably up the main street and into the grocery.

“Morning!” said Silvi to the older woman who was filling a basket with potatoes.

“Miss,” replied the woman formally. Silvi walked over to the neat rows of vegetables and picked up a red apple.

“Can I buy four of these, please?”

“Yes, miss. Anything else?”

“I was hoping for some rice.”

“Not seen rice for a year now, miss. We have a locally made flour pasta.”

“That would make a change, thank you. How much would I need for just one person?”

The woman took down a large pot and poured a quantity of the small disk shapes onto a piece of cloth. “That would do you.”

“Thanks, I will have that then. Also, do you sell bacon?”

“No pork here. The king don’t like pork.”

“Oh, shame.”

“It’s the law, miss.”

“Is it? What would you suggest?”

“We often use smoked goat. It stews well, but you will have to buy that across the way from the butcher.”

“Oh, okay. I also need a map. I am going north, but I am not sure of my way through.”

“Miss, you need to be careful about asking for such things here. You can ask any on your way as you travel, and you will be guided. Just make sure you don’t gallop but walk or trot and you will be treated friendly.”

“Oh, I am not on a horse, I am on foot.”

The woman appeared to panic and looked around nervously. She waved Silvi farther down into the shop. “Miss, I don’t know where you are planning to go, but if you have come from the south, I would head back.”

“Why?”

“No one is allowed to travel through the kingdom on foot, only within their own village or shire.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s been getting worse for a few months now. King Seid doesn’t like people moving around without necessity. If you don’t own a horse, you have no business moving around, and few own horses, miss.”

“Oh, I didn’t realise. Will I get into trouble?”

“While you’re in the village, no one will bother you, but don’t you say you are on foot to no one. Then I suggest you leave by however you came in. You are lucky not to have been stopped already.”

Silvi felt she had tripped into a hornet’s nest, but she wanted to know more. The woman was looking very nervous now, however, so she thanked her, paid, and left to go to the inn. As she walked through the rain, she took a closer look at the village and decided it was bigger than she had guessed. There were five shops in addition to the grocery, all small and well-tended, but none were bulging over with variety. From what she could see, the butcher was all goat and rabbit and not just lacking in pork but pigeons too, often a staple of many poor folk. No archers or nets? There was a shop selling woven cloth, and she guessed it might be a traditional local industry going by the similar patterns.

The inn was the same design as those she had seen in all the villages, but it had an extra floor, a small livery, and the shutters were closed against the wind and rain. Silvi decided against eating and just bought a glass of the ordinary local wine and sat on a bench at one of the long tables. For a lunchtime, it was surprisingly busy, and several of the customers were no older than her. One young lad brought over his wine and a rough plate with bread and jam of some kind and sat at the opposite side of her table, giving her a little smile. She remembered there was an ancient tavern like this called Old Bela’s in Dragon Bay with long tables that everyone shared, but there the people were more open and friendly.

“What sort of jam is that?” asked Silvi, sipping the weak wine.

“Berry of some kind, I think,” replied the lad. “Benna just mixes up whatever she picks, so it’s just luck how it turns out.”

“Smells nice.” Silvi smiled at him. He was good looking in a certain way, but his expression was closed as if he was shy of talking too much. But then, most in here had similar reserved expressions, and the conversation was subdued. “Does it always rain like this?”

“Sometimes. It’s been drier recently.”

“Farmers will be pleased then.”

“Yeah, probably.” They sat in silence a bit longer. Everywhere else she had been, the conversation had been quick and easy, the locals at lunchtimes wanting to know more about this unfamiliar face in their tavern. Here, people showed no interest at all, and the young lad looked like he was almost regretting sitting so close.

"Is this wine local?" asked Silvi.

"We make a lot of wine here though most is taken by the king and sold. It's his land, I suppose. We get the young wines from the second crop."

"Oh."

The door of the tavern rattled open, and three tall, armed men strode in confidently and up to the counter. They were laughing loudly, and one of them took off his leather coat and shook the rainwater onto the floor.

"Three of the ruby, landlord," demanded one of the men, and the landlord brought out a bottle from under the counter and poured an altogether richer wine into three tumblers. He didn't ask them for coin, and they didn't volunteer any but just continued laughing and joking. One of the men cast his eyes around the room and then, noticing Silvi, walked over to the table.

"New face, girl," he said.

"Just arrived."

"Passing through, I hope."

"I am on my way to Willen Town, sir," said Silvi with a polite smile. She and Be-Elin had modified their story, keeping her destination distant.

"What is there?"

"My man. He's a cowman."

"So, why are you not with him as you should be?"

"My dad was sick. I stayed to see him right first."

"Good girl. Didn't see a horse in the livery."

"Sorry, I didn't know there was one here, so I left her grazing on the road on the way in."

"Really. Cos we don't trust people on foot. They may be travelling where they shouldn't be. Strict rules for you peasants here; keeps you safe."

"I didn't know, sorry. Like I said, I'm just going north."

"All right, girl." The man returned to his friends, who looked over at Silvi and made some remark or other; she was certain she didn't want to know what they were saying.

"You must be careful, miss," muttered the young lad, not looking up from his plate. "They don't have the same rules for them as for us. Don't be caught on foot."

"Thanks," replied Silvi quietly. "I think I should find my horse and be on my way."

"I would. Sorry."

Silvi could hear the genuine regret in the lad's voice. She drank the rest of the wine, pulled on her hat, and headed back out into the rain. On her way down the street, she ducked into the butchers and bought one of the rabbits, asking the man to skin it for her.

"I'm useless at skinning," she said with a grin.

"It is easy enough with a sharp knife, miss. Here, I will show you a rough quick way which is good enough if it's just for you."

The butcher was being friendly but was not exactly cheerful. Silvi knew she might not be stunningly beautiful, but she was young and fun and could normally get a smile out of most people. These villagers here were either immune to her charms or the weight of their life was simply too much. Rabbit-skinning lesson over, Silvi paid for the rabbit, thanked the butcher, and made her way out of Mellorn.

"So, where is this horse of yours?" Two of the men from earlier stepped out from behind a farm shed at the edge of the village where the road wound through a small wood.

"Just before the woods. I tied her up by a wall," answered Silvi, smiling.

"Strange, because we came in that way and there was no horse there."

“Oh, no! She must have bitten through her reins again. I better go.”

“You see; I don’t think you have a horse at all. Why would you have a backpack if you have a horse?”

“I don’t know, just easier.” Silvi was panicking and it showed in her voice.

“Or you are lying. And if you are lying that means you are either stupid or you’re a serf and trying to go where you ain’t supposed to be.”

“Look, I’m from the south; I’m just passing through, sir.”

“Might be all lies, girl. I think you better come with us back to the village. You can tell us exactly where you are from, and we can decide what we are going to do with you.”

Silvi knew if they took her anywhere she was going to be in terrible trouble, so without a second thought, she dodged to the left and ran off into the woods as fast as she could.

“Bugger, she’s quick!” The two men crashed into the trees chasing after her.

Silvi didn’t dare look behind. She was smaller than the men and was wearing her light clothes and not thick leather coats and longswords. Speed was her only weapon, and she bolted through the trees, trying to duck around branches, leap over roots, and not shout out every time she scratched herself. Be-Elin was a half league away on the other side of the woods, and Silvi was certain by the crashing behind her these men were not going to give up in a hurry.

Twice she tripped and rolled over, desperately scrambling to her feet to keep running, and more often than she could count she whipped her face with thin twigs or hanging ivy. But she kept moving, kept jumping, and slowly the crashing became more distant. They hadn’t stopped, but they were falling behind.

“Where did I leave you, dragon?” she muttered to herself, stopping for ten seconds to get her breath back. She couldn’t work out where she was, but she knew she had run in roughly the right direction, so she put her head down and kept going.

“Where is she?” Silvi heard one of the men shout.

“This way somewhere. Look, her hat!”

Silvi put her hand on her head. “Oh no, I dropped it!” She ran even faster, her heart beating in her ears and suddenly she was out in the open. “Be-Elin, where are you?” she said to herself, then saw the dragon a little way up the hill, curled up under a big tree. She forced her aching legs back into a run and yelled at the dragon.

“I am being chased! We have to go!”

“What?”

“Now! Please!”

The dragon shot out from under the tree raising her wings briefly and landed in front of the girl.

“Get on!”

Silvi clambered up the dragon’s wing, and Be-Elin leapt into the air, flying straight over the woods.

“You’re going towards them!”

“They won’t see me up through the trees. Hang on tightly!” Be-Elin powered into the sky and kept flying near vertically until she punched into the low clouds. “Lie down. Breathe slowly.” Silvi was panting from running, her ears were popping, and the sudden change in altitude left her breathless. “Concentrate, Silvi! Longer, slower breaths. You must do this.”

“I’m trying!”

Be-Elin flew higher and higher and then they burst through the clouds and into the bright sunlight. Silvi gasped for air, the world spinning around her.

“Breathe more slowly, come on! Long and slow.”

Silvi closed her eyes and forced herself to slow her breathing, trying to relax. Slowly her heart rate lessened and she brought her breathing under control.

“Oh, gods,” she said, stroking the dragon’s neck. “I thought that was the end of me.”

“What happened?”

“Find a camp and I will tell you. I feel almost sick.”

“Lie flat, wrap the straps around your arms, and tuck your feet under my pack. I am flying north until I am clear of this cloud and can find somewhere to stop.

Silvi relaxed, letting the sun warm her. The clouds beneath them made her feel safe, a barrier that no armed men could cross. She almost wished she could stay forever in this peaceful, alien world. From somewhere high above, she heard a long, plaintive call.

“What is that?” she asked Be-Elin.

“The scimrafugol flying south. They are huge birds that can fly nearly the entire way around Dirt without ever stopping.”

“How?”

“There are constant, powerful winds high up in the sky. The birds catch the winds and do not even need to flap. I use those winds if I am flying very long distances.”

“I would love to fly up there!”

“You can’t,” said the dragon, warmly. “You couldn’t breathe, and you would die.”

“Be-Elin, I’m scared.” Silvi was shaking and holding the straps tightly.

“You are safe now, so rest. This will take me a few hours.”

They landed on a dry, rough ridge, overlooking a vast arid panorama.

“The Eastern Plains,” Be-Elin told the girl. “My home.”

“You lived here?”

“Many leagues north and half a thousand years ago, but it could be yesterday.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why, girl?”

“You sound sad.”

“Not sad, Silvi. A bit lonely perhaps.”

“I forget there are no dragons here.”

“The Plains should be full of dragons and callistons. In Angyn, the Draig-Uffer Plain is where most of the dragons live. We like plains. But that hasn’t been true in this region for thousands of years. Now, let’s make camp and you better tell me what happened.”

They glided down the south side of the ridge until they spotted a small glade by a mountain stream. Silvi slid from the dragon’s back and splashed her face, letting the cold, clear water wash away the fear.

“And I lost my hat!”

“What happened?” Be-Elin took off her bag and pulled out the large canvas she used to make her temporary dragon houses.

“That place is horrible, Elin! They are suspicious of anyone on foot because they don’t allow their own people to travel around the kingdom without good reason. If you don’t have a horse, you have no reason to travel, clearly.”

“Why?” The dragon sat next to the girl.

“The king doesn’t like it, they said. Wants to keep people in their place I suppose. The whole village felt closed up and miserable. People were talking and doing their business, and they weren’t rude or unfriendly, but they weren’t happy either. I hated it.”

“Who were you running from?”

Silvi told the dragon about the conversation she had had with the shopkeeper and the armed men in the tavern, and how they had tried to grab her when she left the village.

“You are so right, Elin. I only got away because I am little and faster through the woods than they were. If that had been open ground, I wouldn’t have stood a chance. I must get stronger and quicker.”

“Well tomorrow we start training again, Silvi. We have these hills, and the plains here are almost empty of people. You sort yourself out while I find some tree trunks for my shelter. Oh, and I am proud of you, Silvi.”

“You are? Why?”

“You might have been scared, battered, and lost your hat, but you haven’t cried.” The dragon blinked her pleasure at the girl and leapt into the air.

For the next eight weeks, Silvi trained hard. Be-Elin had only intended a week of training before slowly working their way north, but Silvi was determined to be better prepared. The dragon decided to let the girl take the lead. Be-Elin knew she had made many mistakes. She had assumed every young human was somehow halfway to becoming a rider and a fighter automatically. When she had been young in the Sand Hills that had been true. And when it came to Farthing, he was on a desperate journey to first rescue his sister and then later to rescue his country. He had been surrounded by talented, experienced people like Ben Lowen and Martin Heel, and riders like Gellin. Even Mistry had spent months training with the street fighters Jimmy and Bek before pairing with Mab-Onin. The two had then vanished for months on their mapping quest, dipping in and out of danger, before suddenly turning up near dead, but brilliant. Be-Elin knew she had to slow down and let Silvi catch up. She had to think of the girl as Mistry must have been when she had left her little farm on that fateful journey across to the slave market in Jerr-Vone. But however much time she might like to give her on this isolated hillside, soon the girl would need to return to the human world.

“I am never going to be fast enough just running!” complained Silvi.

“Well, really that is probably what I am here for,” pointed out Be-Elin. “Anyway, your legs are short.”

“You can be very direct sometimes.”

Silvi lay down on the ground and looked up at the sun, trying to get her breath back. On their first day, she had set herself a one-league run starting from their camp, down the steep hill to a particular tree, and then back up the hill to the camp. She had made that run at dawn every day since and was now not only quicker but far less tired when she returned. The rest of her days had been spent running, doing exercises that she invented or Be-Elin remembered the riders doing, and archery using the short bow the dragon had brought with her. Be-Elin had even tried to teach her some fight moves and techniques, but since these did not work against a dragon in any way at all, it had been less successful.

“We need to move on, Silvi,” said Be-Elin. “You look stronger and fitter, you are much better on my back now, and you’re a natural with the bow, but I am running out of things to teach you.”

“What do you want to do?”

“You have only seen a bit of Bind and the problems it faces, and your notebook has many blank pages in it.”

“Why do all this, Elin? If you want dragons back in Bind, why not bring them all here to our camp. We have not seen a single person in the last two months, other than visiting villages in Meressa to buy food.”

“I will explain more soon, Silvi,” replied the dragon evasively. “But it’s important that when dragons return it should be because they belong and are welcomed, not trying to sneak around.”

“What is wrong with this land where they are all living? You said it is beautiful.”

“It is, and for some like the sky dragons it is their home and has been for thousands of years. But for many of the desert dragons and the red mountain dragons in particular, and some of the sea dragons also, this is our home; the plains, forests and mountains of Bind and Preland. I love my house in Angyn, and I love my neighbours, but as soon as I landed back here, I knew I was home again. Silvi, I have hated sneaking around, but I have to. The humans here are not ready for me yet, or so I feel.”

“Have you a plan for us? Or am I just visiting villages randomly?” Silvi stood up and stretched, easing out the muscles that had tensed up on her three-league run across the flat but rough scrubland.

“I have a bit of a plan, something I have been thinking about on the days I have not been here with you. I would like to go first to the Bain Hills and try to work out whether there are any descendants of the riders still there. I know it was where many went before I left, but I don’t know whether they stayed or had to leave, or even if they settled there. Then, perhaps, head into what was Bekon, then up north and across to Great Plains. I’m afraid it is not the most carefully considered plan, girl, but it’s what I have.”

“Then that is what we will do,” said Silvi, yawning. “But I have a big favour to ask first.”

“What is it?”

“I am missing the sea! Can we fly east and play in the ocean?”

“I would love to!”

Silvi had avoided towns so far, but from talking to a few villagers as they travelled through the region of Meressa and flew north, she believed that Meressa Town on the slopes of the Bain Hills would be safe enough. Against Be-Elin’s advice, she decided to stay a couple of nights in the town, feeling the need for human companionship that was not limited by the sun setting. Meressa had been one of the most important towns in Bind, but like many other places it had shrunk from what Be-Elin remembered. Silvi had learned that the population was around seven thousand, more than twice the size of Dragon Bay on Hope, and the town made money from wine, cereal crops, and some copper mined in the Bain Hills. Even before dragon riders from Ponack moved here, it had been home to several communities of Draig Mynyth Coh, and the locals had taken the dying dragons to their hearts when the disease had struck. Like many other places in modern-day Bind, the town was now part of a smaller country, this one a kingdom called Verron, and Silvi was greeted by two ineffectual looking guards on the south road.

“Afternoon, miss.”

“Good afternoon!”

“On foot?”

Silvi had already checked whether any of the laws she had encountered in Senness applied here, so the question caught her off guard. “Well, yes. Sorry.”

“That’s alright, miss. Just if you have a horse, we have plenty of liveries looking for coin.”

“Oh, I see. No, I can’t afford a horse.”

“Well, me neither, miss. Are you staying over?”

“Just a day or two. I am making my way to Bekon, but to be honest, I would like to have a day off from walking.”

“I understand. I suggest you go to the square in the centre of town. There are a couple of good inns there, but if you are short of coin, you might want to try one of the inns in the north of the town by the old dragon fields.”

“Dragon fields?”

“Oh, yes, miss. Dragons used to live here, so the old stories say. To be honest, I have no idea of the truth of it, and I am not even sure dragons ever existed, but they say it’s true. You will find a few places here that have a link to dragons.”

“Well, maybe I will stay for a day then, thank you.”

“Pleasure, miss.” The man turned away to talk to two farmers on the cart behind her. Silvi often felt that she was so naive about her world that if there were any hidden meanings behind anything, she wouldn’t notice even if it was painted bright pink. But even she felt it said much that though the welcome was friendly, the two guards were taking the trouble to note everyone that was coming in and out. Perhaps they were not as ineffectual as they looked.

It was a busy place, this ancient town, and Be-Elin had said it had been one of the largest towns on Bind centuries ago, spilling out some way beyond the old walls. But any buildings outside the town had gone now, from what Silvi could see. She walked towards the square, weaving in and out of people and carts, listening to the sounds of traders and customers, the smells both welcoming and alarming touching her senses, and a general noisiness that she found confusing. Yet it fascinated and amused her. A young man she passed was arguing with a woman that might have been his wife, but when he handed over some coins and stomped off, it was clear she was anything but. The woman winked at Silvi encouragingly, and the girl blushed and sped up. She detoured around a small two-wheeler that had become stuck in a rut in the road. The man was all but pleading with his docile donkey who was ignoring him and chomping on a carrot. Up on a balcony, a woman was scolding a small child for some unknown transgression. The child looked up at her with big eyes and was immediately scooped up into the woman’s arms and wetted with guilty tears.

This was what a town should be like, and even what Silvi would have hoped to have seen in some of the larger villages. But only just below the surface, even Silvi could see the problems. The streets were messy, the townsfolk dressed in old clothes, and the fruit and vegetables in the stalls were low quality. The entire town of Meressa felt worn down, impoverished, and dying. Just because something is noisy, does not mean everything is right with it.

The central square was the first hint she had of the bigger town of five hundred years before. An imposing stone building stood at the top of the square, boasting a large arch in its frontage leading through to a courtyard. In the centre of the square stood an eroded statue of a winged woman in a dry fountain. Around the other three sides were an assortment of wood and brick buildings, including a couple of inns and a few businesses, plus town houses of various sizes. The square itself was littered with stalls big and small, and the sellers were in full voice.

Silvi checked the prices in The Flying Messenger Inn, and finding them too rich for her purse, left the square past the large stone building, and wandered up the steep, occasionally stepped, cobbled streets into the northern quarter. Though poorer still than she had seen on her way in through the southern town, this area of Meressa was quieter with narrower houses and businesses built along terraces up the steep hillside. The Red Stranger, a listing, four-storey inn

just a few doors along a side street, looked promising, and she ventured inside. Meressa was warmed by the winds from the Eastern Plains, and though it was far from being a dry land, today the sun was full, and the inn had all the shutters opened wide. It was a plainly decorated place, or not really decorated at all, Silvi decided, but it was clean enough, and the young girl behind the counter smiled at her in welcome.

“Looking for a room or just a beer?”

“Both!” replied Silvi, smiling broadly. The girl had a soft, lilting accent that she had noticed in a couple of the nearby villages, but it was a little stronger with the girl, almost cheeky.

“That we can do. If you don’t mind a bit of a climb, both the top rooms are available.”

“I have no trouble with that; I have managed it up from the square.”

“You get used to it eventually. My nan always says the rest of her might be half dead, but she has the calves of a ten-year-old!” The girl laughed and Silvi smiled. “So, do you want to see the rooms first or beer first?”

“Room first. My pack is killing my shoulders. Can I wash my face somewhere?”

“There is a pump out in the backyard and a big copper there too if you want a bath. Warn me and I can lock the door for you if you embarrass easily.”

“Thanks, but for the moment, just getting the dust out of my face is enough.”

“Follow me, then.”

The stairs to the two small rooms, right up in the roof, became narrower on each floor. Silvi’s room, she chose the one at the front, was about the same size as her cottage bedroom, but the window was more like a doorway. When the young girl pulled open the shutters, the whole town was laid out before them.

“Oh, that is beautiful!” said Silvi, leaning on the single wrought iron guard rail braced across the window.

“We might not be the poshest inn around the town, but we do have the best view. Just don’t be falling into it.”

“I feel I could fly out of it!”

“Listen to you talk! You a dragon or something?” The girl laughed. It was a warm, happy sound.

“I would love to meet one.”

“Well, the town is full of them. If they are not painted on a wall somewhere, there will be some old bloke who will tell you he met one when he was young.”

“Do you think they have?”

“Nah. It’s just tall tales. But if you like that sort of thing, they’ll be plenty in telling their stories later. We seem to attract them.”

“You do? Why?”

“Well, I think it is more that my ma won’t kick them out, so they are here by default really. Still, what do I care as long as they pay for their beer and keep their hands off my tits! Food is served between six and eight. You eating?”

“I think I will leave your long hill till tomorrow, so yes. I will come down for that beer and then have whatever you are cooking.”

“It will be simple enough, but I haven’t poisoned anyone in months. I’ll pour your beer when I hear the back pump.”

Silvi undid her pack and spread the contents out on the bed, making herself at home. It was a trivial thing to do really since she would be walking north again in a day and a half, having arranged to meet Be-Elin farther up in the hills. The dragon had dropped her off a few leagues

back early in the morning as the girl wanted to take advantage of a full day of walking. She stripped off her travelling clothes and lay on the bed. A fresh breeze from the window tickled her face and she had to stop herself from drifting off to sleep. Silvi had been brought up in a fishing village near the town of Home which was a quarter of the size of Meressa Town, and had spent the last year living in semi-isolation. She had never considered what it might be like to live in a bigger town, but she found the idea intriguing. From what Be-Elin had told her, Johnson Farthing and his sister had lived on a hill much like this, though, if she understood correctly, at a level of poverty she had never known. Before they had both worked, they had taken to stealing rather than ask friends yet again for a handout.

Silvi slipped on a fresh shirt and went to the open window. The sounds of the busy town, the indistinct voices mingled with clatters, bangs, cat howls, and bird tweets, drifted up from below and gave her a welcoming hug. However, she had seen the signs already from street level, and as she studied the scene carefully, the poverty of this world became even more apparent. Below her, she could see the top of the big stone building on the square. A shopkeeper two villages back had told her the king had a castle, but the kingdom was run from Meressa Town, and she supposed this was the building. It was certainly in better condition than anything else around the square, but the roof still looked tatty and at the very least it could have done with a coat of paint. Be-Elin had told her the town had been a wealthy in her time. Apart from the bonus of the copper mines, this was good farming land, and the country had been a supplier of cereals right across Bind. So, what had gone wrong? Had people stopped eating bread? Of course, the modern Kingdom of Verron was very much smaller than the old country of Meressa.

A large flagon of cool beer was waiting for her when she returned from the yard, her wet hair tied behind her head. She had decided to risk taking off her shirt quickly and washing her hair out to get rid of the dust and the remaining salt from her day playing in the sea. It had never occurred to her how much a desert dragon would like water, though she knew they would land briefly to catch fish. Be-Elin had splashed down into the waves with Silvi still on her back, then had casually flipped her off and rolled in the surf.

"Sorry, I forgot to put out a mug," said the young girl, joining Silvi at her table. "Name is Teni Millen."

"Silvi; Silvi Goatherd."

"So, what are you doing in our shack of a town, Silvi Goatherd?"

"Taking a day off from walking, but I am travelling to Bekon."

"Long walk!"

"It didn't look so bad on the map; only about this long." Silvi held her hands a few inches apart. "So, don't you like your town?"

"Oh, I like it well enough, it's my home, but you are the nicest face I have seen in here for a year. Mostly we see traders selling piss-poor items that they have hauled for miles, can only just pay their bill, and then stagger out of here wondering why they came in the first place."

"The town looks ancient, or the middle bit anyway."

"It was quite a place a few hundred years back, so they say, but then there were these wars with some bandits or something out on the Eastern Plains, and the town just about died. It sort of recovered, but not properly. Tooker will be in later, ask him."

"Who is he?"

"Old fart, mainly. But when he was a young fart, he used to teach at the castle, and he knows his stuff. He will probably be in for supper so I will sit him at your table if you want. At least he is not a lecher like some around here."

“Yeah, might be interesting. I have been learning a bit about my grandparents recently, nothing exciting, but it has made me curious about stuff.”

“The only thing I ever get curious about is how much fun I’m about to have!” The girl leapt up from the table and bounced back to the kitchen.

Silvi was impressed how full the inn was by the time she had finished her lamb and dumplings, and how fast the beer flowed, all served up by one smiling and very busy girl.

“Tooker has rolled in, so here is his dinner. Do you want some bread to mop up your gravy?”

“Yes, please,” replied Silvi. “And more of that mild beer. I really like that!”

“Not quite as mild as it sounds, but I know what you mean. Our cellar is cut into the rock and stays cool all year round. Sorry, back in a bit.”

“Hello, young one!” Tooker was a very tall, thin man with a dark complexion, intelligent eyes, and faintly rural accent. He was also old and already a little drunk. “You like history, I hear.”

“Sorry, Mr Tooker? My name is Silvi.”

“Pleased to meet you Silvi and it is just Tooker. This my dinner?”

“Yes, I think some more beer is coming too.”

“Well, I better sit down then. You are not from around here, Silvi.”

“No, I have been working my way up north, but I was born right in the south.”

“That would be what I hear then.”

“I don’t know your accent at all.”

“Well, I am from the far west of Preland, the other side of the Western Alps, but I came here in my twenties; a long time ago now.”

“You were a teacher then?”

“No, I just came looking, to be fair. But I ended up being a tutor for a few lairds and then later up at the castle.” The old man broke off some bread and dipped it into his bowl of lamb.

“Teni was saying the town used to be bigger.”

“Hundreds of years ago it was. Of course, Bind was a different place back then. It was made up of much larger countries, what we think of as the regions now. From what I have discovered, it was not well governed. But there was a lot of trade, and countries like Meressa were doing well because the farming is some of the best on the continent. But then there were these wars over in Preland, and that upset everything. Some say it was dragons.”

“I noticed there are dragons all over the town.”

“Well, it gets a bit confused, you see, because some say that dragons are more stories than real, but I think it is somewhere in between.”

“How does that work?” Silvi poured the two of them beer and sat back, listening to the fascinating old tutor.

“Well, I like stories as much as anyone else, but sometimes old stories hold clues to real events and sometimes they hide truth or just make a mess of it. Now, I have never seen a dragon, and despite what some will tell you, neither has anyone else around here.” The old man looked pointedly at a couple of old-timers in the corner. “But I am sure they were here at one time or another. There are the old ruins up in the hills behind us, to start with, and they don’t look like something a human would have built. I think that whatever the truth about the dragons, there were people who were connected to them.”

“What, a tribe or something?”

"I have asked that question myself a hundred times, but I have never worked out the answer. Out on the Eastern Plains there used to be nomadic tribes, and for some reason I do not fully understand, they left and travelled all the way to Preland. I know this because when I journeyed through the north of Preland when I was young, I stayed in a village inn, and they told me how their ancestors had been nomads over here. Now, some think they were involved with dragons, but I don't think that is right."

"So, do you know who then?"

"Well, sort of. In the town archives, there is a record of people moving down from the Sand Hills at the time of the wars. Probably at the same time when those tribes left. Many set up villages around here, and some moved into the town. They were a quiet people and kept themselves to themselves, but seem to have been liked. We are close to the Eastern Plains, and over there are various desert peoples, the Keffra-See. They had been bothering people along the borders for years, but for whatever reason, suddenly they decided to push into Meressa itself; other places too, I believe. Well, the town had lots of trouble with them and bandits, and these quiet people helped fight them off. But when it settled down again, many of these newcomers left."

"Who were they and where did they go?"

"No one seems to know. I tried to find out what I could because they sounded interesting, not the typical community of people at all. What little was written at the time made them sound like warriors, but whatever had driven them here in the first place might have caused them to leave again. As far as I can work out, some went south, many went to Preland, and quite a few left for Bekon, especially to a country now called Hertenesse and another called Fienland."

"And these people had no name? I mean, the tribe or whatever. And you do not know any actual names of the people?"

"Not a clue. You have to remember, Silvi, the world was turning itself inside out at the time. People were dying, communities breaking up, countries going to war over nothing. Lots of people died over a period of a hundred years or so and even now, both here and on Preland, the population is much smaller than it was. Everything broke apart and the old records were destroyed. So, it's not surprising that this story is lost and forgotten."

"Do you believe in dragons?"

"Yes, I do. As I said, the evidence for them is all around. But I have no idea what they looked like any more than you do or any of the artists that have painted dragons around the town. Like everything, the reality will be far smaller and less impressive than the stories, but that does not mean they didn't exist."

"I hope they did," said Silvi, trying not to cry with laughter. The old man finished his lamb, wiped his face, and downed his beer.

"So do I. Now, if you will excuse me, I'm expected to sing with the old blokes over there who love to persuade me that some dragons were the size of a house!" He chuckled with laughter. Silvi couldn't take it any longer and sprayed her mouthful beer as she burst out laughing. "Exactly, young lady. I agree with you entirely!" Tooker bowed and left to join his friends who, together, broke into a whole series of old folk songs about dragons and the people who rode them. Silvi listened for a while to the words speaking of leather-clad men and women riding high on tall beasts whose skin shone in the sun. She wondered how they would react if they knew that every word of those old songs was true.

"Hey, Silvi," said Teni, sitting down.

"Hello, Teni. Thanks for introducing me, he was interesting."

"I always find him annoying, but that is just me. You want some fun?"

"How?"

"My brother takes over now, so do you fancy coming to the cellars down the road? It sells cheap wine, gets some of the more interesting traders and a few people our age as well."

Silvi was enjoying the songs, but she really needed a fun night. "I'm in!"

Silvi woke up late morning with an aching head and nudged the sleeping form snuggled in next to her. "Wake up, Teni!"

"What? Oh!"

"It's midmorning!"

"No problem." The girl smacked her dry lips. "My mother's turn at cleaning. I get to sleep today."

"Are you still drunk?"

"No idea. How did I get home and what are you doing in my bed?"

"I carried you, and you're in mine. I didn't know where yours was."

Teni giggled. "No wonder I feel so warm; mine is in the basement."

"Well, I am up and out of here!" Silvi stood, and suddenly the world dropped on her head. She felt dizzy and sick and landed back on the mattress laying across Teni's back. "Tomorrow. I am up and out of here tomorrow."

Silvi made a more successful attempt at waking up mid-afternoon and went for a risky wash at the pump. The night had been a lot of fun and included too much cheap wine, but it also had left a darker impression on her. Most of the people she had met were her age, but none of them was like her at all. Very few could read, most them had no proper jobs and little coin, and all of them were planning to leave Meressa Town in the future. The town was not just poor; it was in decline. Whoever was the king was doing a bad job of it. Still, the young certainly knew how to have fun, and she had had a reasonable kissing session with one lad whose name she could not remember, and she had a vague memory of a much more interesting one with Teni. She also remembered thumping another older, bigger lad who had grabbed for her breast. She had knocked him flat, much to his shock and the hilarity of the others.

"Good afternoon," said a smiling older woman. "Are you Silvi?"

"Yes, I am."

"You wouldn't happen to know where my daughter Teni is?"

"Oh, she's in my room. I didn't know which room was hers, I'm sorry."

"Well, thank you for bringing her home. She is only just sixteen, and I keep losing track of her."

"I'm sorry, Mrs Millen! I thought she was older." Silvi was certain she was not going to tell the woman what she had caught Teni doing last night when she had decided to drag her home, but it was way past kissing.

"Are you staying tonight? I saw there was a question mark."

"If I may, please, but I need to leave very early in the morning if that's alright."

"That is fine. I am up before dawn most days. Will you have supper tonight?"

"I am going to wander down to the market and look around, so I will have something there. Then I think I will have an early night."

"Certainly. I will go and evict my youngest from your room then. Have a nice afternoon."

"Thank you, Mrs Millen."

Silvi slipped out hoping the guilt she felt was not too obvious on her face. Thanks to Deni and Sarana, she had built up a good tolerance for beer and wine in the last year, and an innate ability to keep people from kissing or grabbing what they shouldn't. From her experience the night before, Teni simply didn't give a damn, and went for it whatever shape it was.

Meressa Town was quieter today than it had been when she arrived, and she spent the afternoon wandering through the less hilly southern town around some of the historic buildings. Much of the architecture was new to her and obviously very old. These buildings were rectangular in design, built of stone blocks carved with regular, almost geometric patterns. Others were more modern and like The Pub by the Waters in Home. She suspected the most recent buildings were those that had lathe and plaster walls with red tiled roofs, like the tavern where she was staying, but they still looked old. Strikingly, there were no newer buildings at all. None. She might not know anything about town architecture, but she suspected that nothing had been built here in hundreds of years, and they had just reused what was already there.

Teni was right; the town was filled with dragons. Apart from some much-eroded dragon statues that were difficult to make out, there were many modern murals painted on the sides of some of the older, taller buildings. One, just off the main square, caught Silvi's attention. It depicted a big red dragon and a blue and grey dragon with a white chest, raised up on their hind legs, almost head-to-head. The red dragon looked in pain while the other dragon seemed to be roaring at it. In between them, her hands held up as if to stop them fighting was a small woman.

"That is my favourite!"

"Hello, Tooker." Silvi smiled at the old tutor. "Is it an old painting?"

"Well, not really. The murals have to be repainted because they fade, but it is a very traditional image."

"What does it depict?"

"No one is very sure, but people say it is two dragons fighting for the love of a young girl, which sounds a bit odd to me, but it is just a story."

"Why would they be fighting? I mean, why would dragons fight at all?"

"What a strange question, girl. We humans fight one another all the time. It stands to reason dragons would also. Remember, they are only simple creatures really, despite the stories. Will you be at the Red Stranger tonight?"

"I need to leave at dawn in the morning, so I will be going to bed early."

"Well, maybe I will see you in the common room for a pot of mild. Good day!"

Silvi left at dawn having spent a quieter evening in her room chatting to Teni while looking down over the town. She thanked Mrs Millen, who was sweeping down the stone steps.

"Have you far to travel?"

"Lots and lots of walking, but it's been nice staying here. Say goodbye to Teni for me."

"I will do. You have made a friend there, I think. Take care, Silvi, and come back again."

"Thank you, I will."

The girl trotted down the cobbled hill, across the empty square, out through the east gate of the town and jogged up the north road before taking a trail into the Bain Hills. She had sat in her room after Teni had gone to bed writing down not just what she had learned, but her thoughts too. Be-Elin, she realised, was right. Returning dragons to Bind was going to be difficult. Here was a place that actually bothered to remember dragons, but most of the murals she had seen had shown fearsome creatures with lifeless eyes intent on killing. The one exception had been the mural near the square. She was sure that it was the oldest of the depictions, but it was also

misunderstood. Strangely, the most accurate memories were wrapped up in the songs, but these were treated as fanciful children's tales; fun to sing, but no truth in them. Five hundred years might be less than a lifetime for Be-Elin, but for short-lived humans in a society that had been on the point of collapse for generations, it might as well be forever. One good thing had come out of this; Silvi now knew where she wanted to go next.

When Silvi found the old and forgotten dragon village high in the Bain Hills, she took one look at Be-Elin and burst out laughing.

"What?" asked the dragon irritably.

"Elin, you look shattered! What have you been doing?"

"Nothing. I've been here," replied the dragon defensively.

"Not gone anywhere?"

"No, not at all."

"Hunted?"

"No."

Silvi walked up to her dragon friend and tilted her head to the side. "Elin, you've been waiting up for me!"

"So?"

"Two days?"

"I couldn't sleep!"

"You silly desert dragon!"

"I know!"

Be-Elin was out for the count before Silvi even lit the fire so she had to wait to tell the dragon all she had learned and describe the mural. When she did so, Be-Elin fell quiet.

"What is it? You know what that painting is, don't you?"

"Yes, and they have it all wrong, Silvi. The painting could have been of anything at any time, but there has only ever been one sea dragon with a white chest, and that is Fren-Eirol."

"Really?"

"Yes, she was quite unique. The dragons in the villages here were all red mountain dragons, and were badly affected by the disease. For some, especially the larger reds, the last few days were agony. Eafa and a dragon called Mab-Tok developed a tonic to give to dragons just to lessen the pain so they died more peacefully. Mistry, Fren-Eirol and Eafa spent months travelling all over Bind helping dragons who were dying, but it wasn't easy. Sometimes the dragons were in so much pain they fought off attempts to help them. They had to force them to take the tonic. That is what that shows. It is Mistry and Fren-Eirol helping a red dragon."

Silvi touched the dragon's face. "Be-Elin, how many friends did you lose?"

The graceful, proud desert dragon looked at the girl with haunted eyes. "Just about all of them, Silvi."

Dragons can't cry like humans, they don't have tear ducts, but as Silvi discovered at that moment, when the pain is enough, their sobbing will tear the strongest heart in two.

"Hertenesse?" asked Be-Elin.

"I think it's where at least some of the riders went."

"That would have been five hundred years ago, Silvi."

"I know, but if they stayed and married into the local people, some of their stories would have remained. It is worth us stopping in a village or two there to find out what the country is like."

"As good a place to start as any then, but I want to do something first," said Be-Elin. "I want to show you where I was born."

The flight north up to the Sand Hills was the longest that Silvi had yet taken, and at the highest altitude. Eventually, she asked Be-Elin to fly lower as she was too cold, and they stopped at a large village to buy warm, woollen peasant clothes. The dragon cursed herself for forgetting that both the girl and her clothes were from the warmest region of Dirt, not the coldest. At last, they spiralled down and landed in the long-deserted hill town of Ponack.

"I came here on my way down," said Be-Elin. "I don't know how long it's been abandoned because some farmers and others did stay behind, but it's survived well, despite the storms we get up here."

"Are all the houses so small?" Silvi was walking up a lane of tiny, terraced, single-storey houses partly cut into the rock, and she stopped to look through an open window. The wooden shutters were missing and the house was open to the elements. Be-Elin perched on the roof of a long building opposite.

"These are where the single riders lived. They loved these little houses, and these lanes had a reputation for fun and silliness between all the hard work and fighting."

"Are they just two rooms?"

"Some have three, but mostly they are just that large front room you can see and the smaller room through the back arch which was where they slept. Everyone ate in the food halls and these long buildings over here had communal washrooms in them."

"Where did the dragons live?"

"Our dragon houses were on the far side of the hill; at least, mine was. There were villages in the valleys where dragons not involved with the wars lived. Unfortunately, that side of the hill is where the wind hits hardest, and it's all gone now. To be fair to the storms, our houses are wood, not stone, so don't last centuries."

"Do you miss it here?"

"I do a bit. I had already moved away before the disease. Farthing was my rider and I wanted to be with him. Most of the Draig yr Anialr only went to The Prelates, I mean Preland, temporarily, but for me it was permanent. Had the disease not struck, I would have stayed with him the rest of his life. Come on, I have something else to show you."

Silvi climbed easily up the building and onto Be-Elin's back. The dragon smiled to herself; the girl was getting so much stronger and more confident in everything she did. Be-Elin leapt into the air and flew to the top of the town and to the remains of the rider's tavern, The Hen-Thyn; the meeting place with massive windows and a huge stone terrace where the dragon landed.

"The quantity of beer that was drunk here was outrageous," said the dragon with a warm chuckle.

"Were the riders heavy drinkers?"

"The riders? I was talking about us dragons!"

"You drink?"

"Given half a chance, you bet I do. But I need a bigger barrel than you do. It was one of the reasons the red dragons were always so popular; they are phenomenal brewers."

Silvi looked through the arches into the ancient tavern. It was empty now, and the sand and dust had built up inside over the centuries, but she could imagine how it must have been; the large room full of all the characters that Be-Elin had told her about, celebrating their latest victory, toasting fallen friends, laughing and talking together. It brought a surprising tear to her eye.

“It is sad and yet wonderful, Elin,” she said over her shoulder. “I know it was a war, and you all lost friends, but the closeness between you, the bonds, must have been unbreakable.”

“They were, Silvi. I have much pain from that time, all of us who were there do, but I also have many joyful memories. Now, I have a present for you. Turn around.” Be-Elin pulled a long canvas bag down from the roof and laid it on the ground at Silvi’s feet.

“Where is that from?”

“I have had it here waiting for you.”

“What is it?”

“Open it.”

Silvi glanced at the dragon, feeling uncertain for some reason, then untied the cord at one end and looked inside. “A bow?”

“Two bows. Keep going.”

Silvi sat cross-legged on the ground and emptied the bag bit by bit. She first pulled out a powerful longbow and a short bow, both of beautiful quality. She found arrows, tools for fletching, spare strings, and moulds for making hunting and broadhead tips. There were several knives, a short sword, a tough leather water skin, fire-making tin, stones for sharpening, and even a metal flask. Then, right at the bottom, was a smaller canvas bag. Silvi pulled it out and unwrapped it carefully. Inside were two sets of riding leathers.

“Be-Elin?”

The dragon stood up and bowed. “This is a little odd because there is only me and you here, Silvi, and this is really so important that other people should be here too. But though it is only us, please, it still means a lot to me. Silvi Farthing, great daughter of my treasured and most beloved Johnson Farthing, will you be my rider?”

Silvi gasped and stared down at the leathers laid across her knees, and she stroked them with her hand. “Oh, Be-Elin, I so wish Farthing and Mistry were here to see this. I would have loved to have known them and for Mistry to teach me. Yes, if I deserve it, I will be your rider.”

“Then you ought to put on your leathers, rider. And we will fly!”

Chapter 4 - Memories

That Silvi looked different when she shut the door on her small dragon rider house in the deserted town of Ponack was not as important as how she felt. A day spent trying to pull the strong rider's longbow had turned into a week waiting for her wrist to get better. That then stretched to nearly two months. She realised that though she was fit, she really didn't know what to do with the weapons that Be-Elin had given her.

For Be-Elin, the dragon who had been famous for her sometimes unwanted and impatient opinions, it was two months of frustration bordering on agony. She was desperate to get back on track and yet she knew in her heart that if Silvi was not confident of her abilities, it could all go wrong. The dragon had watched the girl change bit by bit, wishing she had a wand she could wave to turn her into an instant rider, but no such wand was available. However, Be-Elin had to admit the time spent in Ponack had produced quite a transformation. Silvi was still on the short side, she still had long blonde hair and a little of her puppy fat around her face, but her arms, stomach and legs were now noticeably muscled. She stood taller, walked more confidently, and was twice as strong as she had been six months before.

So was Be-Elin. Although the two had trained together much of the time, there was nothing the dragon could do to help when Silvi went on her long runs or spent hours practising and hunting with the longbow, learning to make strings and arrows, or just collapsing on her bed exhausted. So Be-Elin had begun her own routine just like she had when she had first learned to fly. She took herself off to Wessen to fly in the mountains, scouted some of the other regions in northern Bekon and Epinod, and hunted with her throwing spears, something she hadn't done for years. It had stopped her losing her temper with the necessary delay while Silvi found her own level, which was proving to be much higher than even the dragon had hoped for, especially with the longbow.

"I am almost scared to leave this place. Is that stupid?" Silvi knew she was no longer the soft cheesemaker on the outside, but inside, she still felt she was walking on quicksand.

"You have brought one tiny corner of this empty town back to life and have made it a home. So no, probably not stupid."

"I thought you said that dragons don't understand territory and ownership like humans do."

"We don't, but that doesn't mean we don't understand belonging. We just don't think that belonging and having exclusive rights to something have to be the same thing."

"I don't think I will ever understand that."

"I have never met anyone who did that wasn't a full-blown dragon," commented Be-Elin, chuckling softly. "Have you everything you need?"

"I'm leaving some of my old clothes here and a few of my other bits and pieces. I know I might not return, but I don't know what else to do with them."

“You may well come back, Silvi. It’s not that far any more. You are my rider now, girl, and we can go where we need. Five hundred years ago, there were regular messages sent between Preland and here, and many of the dragons flew back to see friends, as did the riders. It’s not a big problem at all.”

“I know all that, Elin, but I have a real struggle believing it sometimes. When I woke up the other day, I had a moment of terrible panic because I wasn’t in my little house. My brothers still owe me for that; I want it back.”

“That is for another time, girl.”

“I know, big dragon girl. Do you know where we are going?”

“Vaguely. It’s about four hundred leagues that way.” The dragon pointed south-west with her wing.

“Follow that wing then!”

The rocky ridge overlooked the rolling hills and valleys of north-east Hertenesse and the small village on the banks of an enthusiastic little river. Silvi was hoping this was actually Hertenesse this time. She had asked directions at a previous village after she had discovered they were in the wrong place. Generally speaking, she was amazed at Be-Elin’s knowledge of Bind and how to get anywhere. She had a phenomenal memory for landmarks and the sense of direction of a homing pigeon. However, the dragon was also five hundred years out of date, and these small kingdoms had not existed in her day.

“It’s very small,” commented Be-Elin, peering at the distant community in the valley.

“Well, if I am going to make an idiot of myself again, I want to do it in front of as small an audience as possible, girly.”

The regular use of nicknames like girly or dragon girl had sprung up after a couple of late nights of rude stories about what each of them expected from relationships within their respective species. It had broken down the few remaining barriers between the two, and they both had similar ideas of fun and no strings, even if for Silvi it was more about expectation than actual experience.

“Are you going to change?” asked the Draig yr Anialr.

“Sadly. Autumn is a new experience for me, and it’s getting chilly, but I am not sure about walking into a small village wearing riding leathers. All we know about Hertenesse is that it’s a monarchy, is poor like most of the rest of Bekon, but is thought of as a friendly place by neighbouring villagers who never actually come here. Not exactly detailed.”

“Well, I’m hungry, so hurry up and I will drop you off. I saw a couple of deer on the way in and I think I will go and introduce them to a salivating dragon. Are you going to stay the night?”

“If I can. But it’s small so it may not have an inn. Wherever you drop me, come back there at dusk. If I am not there, pick me up in the morning.”

“Alright. Change quickly; it’s starting to rain.”

The rain was not heavy, but it was persistent, and Silvi felt like a soggy mouse by the time she walked the league to the small hamlet. She was learning how different villages were on the ground from how they appeared high in the air. Although you could get a general idea of the size of a community flying a few thousand feet up or viewed from a distant ridge, it was not always clear what was housing and what was just a shed. This little hamlet seemed even smaller now she was here.

“Henny,” said Silvi to herself, looking at a sign above a shop. “I wonder if that is what the village is called?” The small general shop was open so she walked in out of the rain.

“Sorry about the weather!” said the old man behind the counter. “We get all the worst coming down over Henny Ridge.”

“I’m a good swimmer, sir,” replied Silvi with a smile. Well, by deduction, this hamlet was indeed called Henny. “I was hoping you might have some fruit and dried biscuits.”

“I have some early apples, fresh as anything, miss, and some salt cakes which are a local speciality.”

“Sounds my sort of thing. I am travelling over from the east.”

“Heading anywhere in particular?”

“That depends on the weather. It has closed in over the last few days.”

“The cold has come earlier this year, but it may brighten up again.” The man handed over the packets of apples and the small, hard cakes. “Anything else?”

“You don’t have maps of Hertenesse, do you?”

“No, sorry miss. You’ll need to try one of the bigger villages or towns for that. We don’t have a call for them here since we’re not on a major wagon route. I take it you are on foot?”

“Yes, I am. A horse would be nice, but I can’t afford to buy one or pay livery.”

“Many around here would sympathise with that, miss. Some of the farmers even share animals, especially ootheren for working in the fields.”

Ootheren, the large, powerful, but notably stubborn hexapods, were popular in the north of Bind as work animals, particularly in farming communities. Just one of the beasts could pull more than could two Bekon Browns draught horses, but they were less versatile and useless if you wanted to travel faster than a trot.

“Talking about the weather, is there an inn here?” asked Silvi.

“The Whispering Trout is at the far end of the village, but it’s just a tavern. If you need to stay somewhere, most of the farmers are happy for friendly travellers to stay in their barns.”

“Friendly?”

“Well, we don’t get many unfriendly types, the King tries to keep the roads safe, but some cross the borders looking for trouble.”

“Well, I fancy a beer and a couple of hours out of the rain, so I will try your tavern.”

“I would hurry up, miss. It sounds like it’s getting worse out there.”

And it was. Silvi had bought better travelling clothes on their way across Bekon to replace her light southern clothes that she had brought from Hope. At Ponack, she had spent almost the entire time in the comfortable riding leathers unless she was on her ritual morning run, so had no need for regular clothes at all. It had been strange living in the abandoned town on her own. Be-Elin had made up a new shelter for herself where her old house had stood on the other side of Mount To-Pon, past the tavern. Silvi had swept out and repaired one of the rider’s houses that were cut into the steep sides of the small sandstone mountain on which Ponack was built. The dragon had been right, and Silvi had brought the tiniest corner of the old town to life. She had swept clean the path up from her house to the tavern, cleared up the terrace outside the tavern’s windows for a training area, and made the bits she needed hospitable again. But she had only cleared enough for one small rider and dragon; the rest was left to the dust and winds from the Eastern Plains.

The rain was dripping off her hat when Silvi stepped up onto the long veranda in front of the brick-built tavern. She removed her light oilskin and shook off the excess rain. The style of a couple of older buildings in Henny reminded Silvi of the Pub by the Waters in Home. Though they were of a much poorer build and had shutters rather than leaded glass in the windows, she could see now from where Farthing had taken his ideas. The few farms she had passed on her

way in had been built out of logs, however. Hertenesse was right in the middle of Bind, and from what they could work out, ran from the northern edge of the vast Bekon Moors to about eighty or so leagues north, and was a similar size east to west. Without a map, it was hard to be sure, and Silvi was feeling awkward about looking quite so thick, which had amused Be-Elin.

"Hooks up on the wall!" called over a stout man from behind the small counter as she stepped into the shadowy but friendly common room.

"Thanks! I'm drenched."

"Welcome to Henny; we do that to people come autumn."

Silvi hung up her coat and hat, shook her hair out, and walked up to the counter grinning.

"Well, it's an interesting greeting. Do you have a wet beer to go with it?"

"Of course! Wheat or Stout?"

"Wheat for me."

"Coming up. A young face to be on the road."

Silvi smiled, pretending to be highly flattered. "Depends on your definition of young." She had decided to stick to her story of being older than her seventeen years. In most cultures across Bind you were working by the time you were ten at the latest, and the girls were married off and mothers by fifteen, which sounded idiotically young to Silvi. She didn't want to be caught out by the one place that thought seventeen was still a child so twenty-three seemed a safer bet.

"Well, you are probably over fifteen and under thirty, which is about as good a guess as I ever make. Still young to me."

"Have you any food today?"

"Vegetable and bacon pie or root soup with bread."

"Soup sounds nice."

"Take a bench by the fire, and I will bring it over,"

"Thank you, sir."

Silvi took her pot of cloudy, frothy wheat beer and sat at one of the long tables by the large inglenook fireplace. She was missing her riding leathers, and the warmth from the fire was welcome.

"Good day, miss." Two older looking farmers who had followed her into the tavern brought their stouts over and sat opposite her. "Mind if we share the fire?"

"Not at all, sir."

"We should be ploughing up our north field today, but Del here broke a blade on a rock yesterday so we are enjoying lunch while the smith makes us a new one."

"Not my fault you didn't remove the rocks proper, Gen!"

"I have never farmed anything that wasn't a goat, I'm afraid," commented Silvi. "And I know nothing about ploughing."

"It is the greatest tool invented," said the old man with a chuckle. "It's what makes us different from the ootheren. They just eat till it's bare and then move on; we can plough it up, start again and stay where we are. Without the plough, we wouldn't know where home was."

It was an interesting thought, mused Silvi. "How big is your farm?"

"My brother and I here only have a small farm. We used to rent a bigger one, but we saved up and bought a tiny piece of land. We're older now, so it suits us, but also it means that we get to leave something for our children to share between them, maybe even to grow."

"I like the sound of that. My little patch was unclaimed land, so I just needed to mark it then stay a year and a day working it daily without anyone challenging my claim, and it became mine. Have to pay taxes on it, though."

“You are lucky, girl,” said the brother Del. “All the land in Hertenesse is owned by the king, or at least was.”

“Was?”

“Well, the last king, King Deven, he says he didn’t like his old man’s ways, so he decides to start changing it. Wasn’t easy, like, cos he had to get rid of all these little lairds and thanes who had been gifted lands by the dukes over the years. Took him nearly thirty years to pay just some of them off. Most of them left the Kingdom entirely; seems like they couldn’t get away from the idea of serfs. Anyway, after he died, we got ourselves Edver, his second eldest; his eldest lad having been taken by something he picked up in a backstreet somewhere, according to the gossip.”

“What sort of thing?” asked Silvi innocently.

“You know; the sort of thing you get when you can’t keep your pecker where it is meant to be!” explained Gen, Del’s brother, with a wink.

“Oh!” Silvi blushed, which didn’t bode well for her lying about her age.

“So anyhow,” continued Del. “King Edver has carried on what his old man started. For the last twenty years, he has been selling off the land, just little bits, to anyone who can buy it. Though he’s been clever, like, so you don’t get the rich folks buying it all up.”

“How does he do that?”

“A couple of his riders will come into a village like Henny and put up a notice with a list of two or three plots that will be sold in the morning. We don’t have no rich people in the village, so it is only us here to buy it. Otherwise, we wouldn’t have a chance.”

Two bowls of soup and one pie arrived for the three of them, and Silvi took a happy sniff at her small bowl. “This smells good.”

“We don’t have much around here, but we do well with what we have,” said Del.

“The village doesn’t feel like it is short of anything,” commented Silvi. It was a tiny place, but even through the rain, she could see it was well looked after.

“That is the King again,” said Gen.

“He looks after the villages?”

“No, quite the opposite. He has made sure that these communities feel like ours. When something is your own, you look after it don’t you? If you have just borrowed it or someone is waiting to take it away all the time, then what care you about it?”

Silvi thought about the little farms along the Tennet in Hope. All of them had been taken on using the same claim system that she had used as it was rough, unwanted land that had never been worked. All the smallholdings were looked after, and the people cared about their plot and their neighbours. “So, is it all like this in Hertenesse?”

“I couldn’t tell you to be fair, miss,” said Del. “Don’t really get to travel, and we are not on a trading route to pick up gossip that much. But you got to understand that this is a poor country. Even the king is not wealthy and powerful like some I’ve heard about.”

“He’s right, miss,” chimed in Gen. “One of the reason’s we think he’s done this is that he’s short of coin.”

“So, he wants to be rich?” asked Silvi, dipping the crusty bread into her bowl and making a mess.

“Well, we all wants that!” said Gen with a short laugh. “But no, not like that. Hertenesse has neighbours all around, and some of them are less than friendly. We get lots of trouble on the borders, especially from the south-east, and trade can be right hard. King Edver needs the money to make the roads safe and keep the wrong sort of people out. He knows we are a poor

land, and even if he puts taxes up, many people have nowt to give. This is his only way; sell the land back to the people bit by bit.”

Silvi frowned from behind a piece of bread. “You make it sound a troubled country, Gen.”

“Poor and troubled, girl, like everywhere else in Bind, so I hear,” replied the old farmer, sadly. “But we are all very fond of her. I would rather be living here poor with a king who cares about me, than to be better off in a land where the king thinks I am no different from the dirt on his shoe.”

Silvi looked around the common room. It had filled up more since she had arrived, but although the locals were chatting quietly, it had none of the tension or awkwardness she had seen in Mellorn in the Kingdom of Senness. The old men were telling the truth. People here had very little, but they were not starving or depressed, even if they worried about the neighbouring countries.

The rain had lessened considerably when she left the tavern a couple of beers later, and she slipped out of the hamlet to wait for Be-Elin. She had risked people knowing she was ignorant of this part of the world, and chatted with the landlord about the rough geography of the country. He had been born in a much larger village twenty leagues to the south, and had suggested she go there if she were looking for work of any sort. The farmers around his old village of Given kept sheep, he said, so that might suit her since she knew about goats. She chuckled when she thought it would also suit Be-Elin who had a fondness for lambs, especially roasted over a fire.

“It certainly sounds an interesting country this,” said Be-Elin when they met up. “You said they called the messengers from the king riders?”

“That could just be because they were on horseback, idiot,” pointed out Silvi, standing under a tree while she stripped off her peasant clothes and put her leathers back on.

“True, but you never know. To Given, then?”

“Yes, if you can find it through this mist and rain.”

“I can get us most of the way there, find a hiding place and then we can wait till the rain clears and work out where it is. Bigger village and lots of sheep?”

“Given is much larger; almost a small town. The landlord said there were maybe a thousand people there, and yes, a lot of sheep. He said it has a small market square. Am I going to get drenched?”

“We both are, which is why I took my hides off.”

“Makes sense. Nothing worse than a soggy dragon.”

“I thought you liked sliding off me when we go swimming?”

“That’s not thousands of feet up in a cold wind when it’s raining!”

“Fussy! Ready?”

“Give me a chance, big girl, these leathers take a wriggle to get into.”

“Fatty.”

To their amusement, the general description of twenty leagues south, lots of sheep and a square proved to be all they needed. With the sun out, but a chilly northerly breeze blowing across the fields, Silvi walked to the small, busy little market at the village centre, while Be-Elin flew off to drool over some of the more remote hill sheep. Silvi had already decided to stay the night and went straight to the ancient and strangely named Old Man of the Plains Inn sat at the top of the square. Unlike the other brick and wood buildings, the ground floor of the inn was heavy stone with thick walls, and the front boasted a broad terrace paved with the same stone. Since it was market day, the inn was busy and the rooms full. Silvi had to make do with sharing

the hayloft above the stable with a man and his daughter who were visiting a relative, and two young men who were up from somewhere west to buy a couple of rams.

"Who are you visiting?" Silvi asked the girl who was around thirteen years old.

"My aunt. She is a lot younger than my dad, and she is marrying tomorrow."

"Couldn't stay with her?"

"It's a large family, and since my dad can afford the inn for two nights, he decided to stay here. Not sure about being in the loft."

"It can be itchy, but there is plenty of straw up here, so it's warm," said Silvi.

"We always go for the loft for exactly that reason," said one of the young men, sitting on a bale. He was a couple of years older than Silvi, she guessed. "Me and my kid brother are always travelling for our dad in the winter months, and most of the places we stay don't have fires in the rooms. This is better as long as you have plenty of blankets."

"Well, I don't think my dad is too happy," said the girl. "He doesn't want me to be in the common room too late."

"It's alright here," said the young man. "We've been up a few times, and it doesn't get trouble like some places. Mostly a load of old people swapping folk tales; a bit of a tradition in Given."

"What sort of tales?" asked Silvi.

"Oh, I don't know, never listened much. They sing old children's songs too about dragons, princes, princesses, and that sort of thing. Stay in the common room long enough and you will hear plenty, trust me!" The young man smiled and went to help his brother finish sorting out their bedrolls.

"Will you be there tonight?" called over the girl with a shy smile.

"Depends how long we have to haggle for these rams and how early we have to pick them up in the morning. But we might be." The two young men slid down the ladder and headed back to the square.

"They're nice," said the young girl to Silvi.

"Possibly," replied Silvi with a groan. All she needed was another Teni, especially much younger, undoubtedly far more innocent, and with a big father just down the ladder grooming his horses.

Silvi was picking up her story where she had left off before going to the Sand Hills, and would tell anyone who asked she was travelling up from Meressa on her way to a small village in North Bekon called Sarn-Lien. It was a village plucked from Be-Elin's memory, so she hoped it still existed. Finishing her own unpacking, Silvi told the girl she would see her later and went to look around the market.

Given did feel more like a town than a village. There were eight or ten stalls on the square, selling mostly fresh produce, one selling some nicely matured ewe's milk cheeses, and another one selling second-hand tools. None of them were selling anything that was expensive or unique, and there was obviously not a huge amount of coin to be had, but the sellers were enthusiastic, the square was clean, and the small central statue of a man shooting an arrow into the sky actually had water in his little pool. Poor, but cared for, thought Silvi. She liked it. Although she didn't need to buy anything, she poked around the stalls and bought herself a couple of apples to eat and some good flax cord for bowstrings from a hardware store.

"The square looks ancient," she said to the young boy in the shop while he was winding up her cord.

"Dates back to the founding of the village, my mum tells me," he said. "It's meant to be like five hundred years old or something."

"Are any of the buildings that old?"

"Only the tavern I think, though some of the farmhouses outside the village are old too. My uncle worked on an old farm. The family had been there for generations, and he said they had come from the Plains originally. There are a few families like that here. The landlord of the inn says he can trace his family back to the Plains as well."

"The Eastern Plains you mean? That's a long way away."

"I don't know anything about that, but that is what they say at any rate. That is half for the cord, miss."

"Here you go."

"Enjoy your stay." The boy turned to serve an older man who had walked in.

As it was market day, the common room of the inn was open all afternoon, and though it was chilly, Silvi sat outside on the terrace with a terracotta mug of hot, spiced wine.

"Hello!" It was the young girl and her father.

"Can we join you?" asked the man, smiling.

"Please do. I was just watching the people in the market."

"I am Fin, and this is my daughter Lvin who you met earlier."

"I'm Silvi. Lvin says you are here for a wedding?"

"Yes, my baby sister. Well, not a baby now, I suppose. She's nearly seventeen."

"No, definitely not a baby," said Silvi with feeling, being only a few months shy of eighteen herself. "Has she moved here?"

"No, my family's been here for generations," replied Fin. "I moved away when I met Lvin's mother." The girl looked a little sad. "She passed on two years ago, now, but we keep the farm between us."

"I'm sorry." Silvi turned to the girl. "I lost my mother when I was young. It can be hard being brought up by a dad sometimes." She smiled and winked, and the girl grinned back. "So, was your family from this part of the world? The boy in the hardware shop was saying some families moved here from the east."

"Ours was one of those," said Fin.

"Where from in the east? The Eastern Plains?"

"Well, that is what my grandma told me," he replied. He didn't seem keen to talk about it, but Silvi pushed on, if gently.

"I've come up from Meressa, and there was an old tutor down there who told stories. He said that a group of people came down to Meressa Town from up in the North of the Eastern Plains somewhere, sorry, I don't remember where, and then moved up here and further north, he thought. That was about five hundred years ago."

"You're very interested in all this, Silvi," said Lvin.

"I'm from the south, Lvin, but my family all have fair hair and skin. I have been trying to find out more about them. So now I am interested in everyone else too."

"Where are your family from?" asked the young girl.

"I am not very sure, but I think at least some came from over from Preland originally, possibly about the same time your family came here. I've found it really hard to learn much, especially since most of my family are not interested at all."

"Oh, our family is full of stories!" said the girl merrily. Her father rolled his eyes.

"Really?" Silvi smiled her best sweet smile at Fin, and his shoulders sagged.

“And most of those are just that, Lvin,” he said. “Stories.”

“Oh, don’t say that, dad! I love all those stories about the riders of the Sand Hills!”

“Riders?” asked Silvi, innocently.

“It is all much vaguer and uninteresting really,” said Fin. “Whatever my daughter tells you. The stories say they lived in the Sand Hills and used to fight some of the other desert people together with nomadic tribes that lived there.”

“They fought riding dragons!” said the girl.

“And that was your great-gran stirring you up, Lvin!” Fin put on a broad and false smile. “It was horses really.”

“You always say that!” The girl was smiling, so Silvi guessed this was a regular little play between the two.

“Do you know any more about them, like their names?” asked Silvi.

“No, I don’t, sadly,” answered Fin. “If I did, I might be able to scale down these stories a bit, but the truth is lost now. I know some people say they know a bit more, but you have to understand, Silvi, this was five hundred years ago; we don’t even know if any of it is true.”

“You would like it to be, though,” said Silvi cheekily.

“I would!” said Lvin.

“She definitely would,” said Fin, laughing. “Me, I would just be happy to get through a day in this world, let alone in an old one!”

“Now that is something I can fully understand,” replied Silvi, smiling.

“Silvi,” said Fin, looking a touch embarrassed. “Will you be in the common room tonight?”

“Yes, I will. I don’t have anywhere else to be. Why?”

“The trouble with the loft is that it’s alright to sleep in, but not to just sit in during the evening. But Lvin, despite what she thinks, is a bit young for the common room.”

“I am not and I want to be in the tavern!”

“See what I mean? Anyway, I thought if you were there, she would have someone to talk to rather than just me all the time. I want to chat with a couple of old friends if I can, people I have not seen for years, and it will bore her silly.”

“I don’t mind at all, Fin. I don’t know a soul here, so we can natter away and watch all you grown-ups together.”

The man smiled. “Then I owe you a beer. Thank you. Come on, Lvin. We need to sort out the cart and then we can find our supper. See you later, Silvi.”

“Bye, Silvi!”

“See you later, Lvin.”

Silvi might be surer of herself now, but she was still cautious and hadn’t forgotten what had happened in Senness. Be-Elin had stressed to her that as a young woman in a world where many men thought they were superior to women, she needed to be alert all the time, not just when she was off to find a fight. Silvi’s own experiences with both her brothers and the guards in Senness had made her realise she could not rely on some magical instinct for trouble. If she did not know where she was, treat it as potentially hostile. So, when she climbed up to the loft before supper, she hid a couple of medium-sized knives under the long skirt which many young girls around the area wore.

Supper was delicious. Lamb was the local beast of choice, and the braised lamb with stewed vegetables and plenty of sweet herbs was welcome on a night that was becoming chillier and windier. Having tried the spiced wine earlier, she stuck to the grape, though this time she asked

for one of the lighter wines. She wished to listen to the songs and stories, and not doze off halfway through the evening. The common room soon livened up, and a couple of locals turned up with pipes and hand drums to accompany some robust singing. Lvin and her father appeared from the rear dining room, and the girl squeezed between Silvi and the end of the bench.

"There are a couple of lads I used to kick around with over at the bar," said Fin. "Alright if I leave her with you for a bit?"

"Of course," said Silvi, and waved the man away to meet his friends. "So, girl, tell me about your great-gran and the dragons."

"Oh, dad hates all that stuff!"

"Why?"

"I don't know, really. Not so much here I think, but where we live in the far west of Hertenesse, people are not interested and can be a bit stupid about the stories, especially the dragon ones."

"You like them, though. Do you think they are true?"

"I would love them to be! Stories of girls riding across Bind standing on huge dragons and firing bows? I mean, who wouldn't want to be one of them!"

"Just girls?"

"Oh, boys as well, I suppose, but I like the girl stories."

"Like what?"

"Well, I don't remember them all because I haven't seen my nan since I was little, and she died years back now. There was one about a red-headed girl that attacked some big castle up in the far north with hundreds of dragons and hundreds of giant archers."

"Can you remember it?"

"Not all of it, but the story goes that she and her warriors, these riders, sneaked into the castle while the giant archers made a ring right around the outside. Then, when the archers attacked, she used magic to blow up the castle and kidnap the king. As the castle was burning, she jumped on her huge dragon, with all the riders on their dragons, and they flew to where the king kept his slaves and freed them."

"That sounds unbelievable."

"I know it does, Silvi, but my nan said these old stories always had something in them, something that was true."

"So, which bit do you think is true?"

"I know it is weird, but I think the dragon bits are. People are always saying there used to be dragons, but they're all dead now. But that means they did exist. So why not ride them?"

"Do you think dragons would let people ride them?" The room was getting noisier and the singers were singing some story about a maiden who sounded like she wouldn't be a maiden by the last verse.

"Well, my horse lets me ride her, so why not? Can I have some wine?"

"Er, I will compromise. Hang on." Silvi called over a serving girl and ordered wine for herself and grape juice for Lvin.

"Not proper wine?"

"Proper wine you can argue with your dad for. Don't get me into trouble!"

"Yeah, sorry. You are nice, Silvi. How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

"You got a husband or a boy?"

"No, girl. I have been travelling for months. Not really had time."

“You want one?”

“Maybe one day. I like deciding what I do or don’t do. Not sure I would be very good at taking orders from a man.”

“My mum says that you take orders from your dad, but you share with your man. Or she used to.”

“Your mum sounds like she was a lovely lady, Lvin.”

“She was, Silvi. I miss her.”

“I can see that. Here’s your fake wine!” The two girls tapped mugs and drank down their different drinks.

As the evening wore on, the songs became more and more outrageous to the point that Silvi was not sure whether she was blushing because of the naughty tales or because she was sitting next to a young girl who couldn’t stop giggling in the right places. But wine and even grape juice have an effect on man and woman, and Lvin elbowed Silvi in the ribs.

“I really got to go pee, Silvi.”

“Come on then, girl. Let’s go out to the backyard.”

“Sorry!”

“Don’t worry. ‘Scuse mate!” Silvi pushed between a group of market traders who were singing loudly, dragging the girl by the hand, and led her out to the peace of the backyard by the stables.”

“Are you going too?” asked Lvin.

“No, you go. I’ll wait here. I was getting hot in there anyway.”

“I’ll be quick. It is dark out here!” The girl disappeared around the back of the barn to where the pits were.

“Hello, I wondered if I would see you,” said the young man from the loft as he walked up.

“Oh, hi. Did you get your rams?”

“One of them. The other one we didn’t like the look of.”

“Where is your brother?”

“Round here somewhere. So, you been in the common room?”

“Yeah, noisy in there and bloody hot,” replied Silvi, enjoying the cool of the night, though it was getting windy again.

“It’s always nicer back here, girl,” said the young lad, smiling and moving a bit closer.

“I am going back in a minute, though,” said Silvi, pointedly.

“Oh, you don’t want to rush. I can keep you warm, you know.”

“Not interested in being kept warm, to be honest.”

“Course you are. I saw your smile. Blondes like you are always interested, that’s what my Da says.”

“Well, he says wrong.”

“Well, I say he says right. Come here!”

“Silvi!” Suddenly, a shrill scream came from the back of the small barn.

“Lvin?”

“Leave her, you’re mine!” The lad grabbed for Silvi and pushed her against the wall.

“Silvi, help me!” The voice was full of fear and Silvi growled in anger.

“You little shit!” she snapped at the lad who had his arm across her neck. She grabbed his wrist and slammed her knee up into his groin. He doubled over in pain and shouted out.

“Berin! Help me!”

Another shrill scream came from behind the shed and Silvi span the lad around and smashed him over the back of the head, knocking him to the floor half-conscious. By the time his brother came running out from behind the barn, Silvi had a knife in her hand, and she slammed the butt into his face, then kicked him in the stomach, knocking him onto his back. In a flash, she was on top of him and had her knife to his throat.

“What have you done with her?” she screamed at him.

“Get off him, girl!” The back door of the tavern slammed open, and the landlord shouted at her.

“She just attacked us, mate!” said the first lad, staggering to his feet.

“I said get off him!”

Silvi ignored the landlord and pushed down on Berin’s throat. “What have you done?” she shouted at him. Suddenly she felt strong arms around her, and two big men dragged her off the young man.

“Hold her!” shouted the older brother. “She attacked me for nothing!”

“Are you screwed up, girl?” demanded the landlord, marching over to Silvi. “You nutty or something? Boys, drag her off and lock her in the back room!”

“Dad!” Lvin staggered out from the back of the barn; her dress torn, a cut on her arm, filthy dirty, and with tears flowing down her face.

“Lvin!” Silvi twisted, punched one of the big men in the stomach, kicked the other in his kneecap and rushed to the girl, hugging her tightly. The big men jumped up to stop her, but the landlord shouted at them to hold.

“Oh, the gods!” Fin pushed through the crowd that was gathering, ran over to his daughter and grabbed her. “What happened?”

“I had to pee! I am sorry, dad! I only wanted to pee!” said the girl, sobbing.

“Silvi, what happened?”

Silvi took a breath and glared at the two brothers. “We came out so she could pee and these two attacked us. That one!” She pointed at the younger brother. “He attacked Lvin behind the barn.”

“Grab them,” commanded the landlord.

“She’s lying!” shouted the older brother. “She wanted it! I know she did. All blondes want it.”

“Get rid of them!” said the landlord in disgust.

Fin was holding onto his daughter, shock on his face. “What did he do, Lvin? What did he do?”

“I screamed at him, dad. I screamed hard!”

“What did he do?”

“He ripped my dress, but I screamed. He grabbed me, but I screamed again, and he hit me, then he ran!”

Fin turned to Silvi, the long, sharp knife still in her hands. “Thank you,” he said. “Whoever you really are, thank you.”

“My name is Silvi; that is who I am, Fin.”

“I know. And I know what that is too. That’s a rider’s knife.”

The landlord walked over once his two men dragged off the young brothers and locked them in an outhouse.

“Sorry, girl. I didn’t know. Look, we’ll make room in the inn, up on the top floor. I won’t make you stay in the stables tonight.”

"Thanks," said Silvi. "These two first, though."

"Of course. Molly!" called out the big man. "Take Fin and his daughter upstairs and give both a drink, even the girl. Everyone else, back inside. Go on, you ratbags. Get inside!"

The serving girl took Fin and the still sobbing Lvin upstairs while the Landlord's men herded everyone else into the common room. At last, it was just the landlord and Silvi left.

"You want a drink?" The man handed over a flask. Silvi took it and sniffed. It was rum like they made in Hope. She took a swig and handed it back.

"Thanks."

"Your name is Silvi?"

"Yes, it is."

"I'm Berron. I have known Fin for years, so thanks for what you did."

"I was meant to be looking after her. Sorry."

"Don't be. You can't always plan for shits like those two."

"Perhaps."

"Not often you see a youngster who can take down two young men like you did. And I have never seen a young woman take on my lads, that's for certain."

"I was angry."

"No, you weren't, girl. You knew what you were doing. I served in the King's guards before I inherited this place, and I know what I saw." Silvi shrugged. "Fin is right, though. That knife of yours, can I see it?" Silvi looked up at the older man warily but decided to let him see the knife. "I have one of these. They normally come in pairs. Have you got the other one? Don't worry, I don't need to see it."

"Yes, I have the other one."

"There is a difference between yours and mine though, girl."

"What difference?" Silvi was tired. She had been close to killing the younger brother, and it was just beginning to hit her.

"Yours are new. Mine are five hundred years old."

Silvi looked up at the man, remembering what the boy in the shop had said. "Your family, were they from the Eastern Plains?"

"Yes. So were Fin's and several other of the families around here."

"Fin was a bit vague when I asked him earlier."

"He knows his history, don't worry, but it was a long time ago, and though we know where we came from and have our stories, crazy stories some of them, it's hard to know what is true and what is not. Whatever, we all know we come from riders. A lot of people in the Kingdom do."

"You sound proud, Berron."

"I am, girl. And if my ancestors were anything like you were tonight, then I have something to be proud of too. Where are you heading?"

"Honestly?"

"That would be nice. I've been honest with you."

"Then I don't know. I think I want to stay in the area longer, at least in this country. I want to find out more about the people here."

"I understand. Are you looking for your own people?"

"Yes, in a way. I am getting closer, I think."

"This is a good country, Silvi, with good people in it, despite those two creeps. But it has its problems, mostly from outside, and it needs people like you. You might want to think about that as you travel around. Now, can I get you another drink?"

"Berron, I just want to curl up in the straw and go to sleep. I don't think I am going to be good company."

"You can go and share with Fin and his daughter; there are four bunks in their room."

"No, I think they need to be on their own, but thanks for the offer."

"Well, sleep well. I will see you at breakfast." Berron returned inside, leaving Silvi standing on her own, looking at her knife.

"Oh, hell," she said to herself.

Silvi was gone before dawn, but when Berron climbed up to the loft in the morning to see if she was alright, he found a small note addressed to him with just four words written inside. "It is all true."

"Sen-Liana never read any of this, that is for certain."

"How do you know?"

"Well, it contradicts half of what she has ever said, to start with."

"You never did have time for her, did you?"

"I liked her! I just thought none of it made sense. Too..."

"Mystical?"

"Exactly. You never liked the idea of it being magical anyway."

"You can read me like a book."

"Rather appropriate, don't you think? Well, scrolls, not books, but still."

"Any reason why you are sitting down here in the cold and damp rather than taking all these upstairs to the library?"

"I don't want them to disintegrate on me. Hey, no doubt about it; this whole business about only one Ancient at a time is a pile of crap. This might as well be talking about a family of them. What, nothing to say?"

"Before my time."

"Convenient."

Chapter 5 – New Recruit

“I am such a bloody old idiot!” Be-Elin stomped around the hill where she and Silvi had camped. “It was staring me right in the face!”

“What was?” asked Silvi.

“This place, all of it!”

“Be-Elin, stop!”

“What?”

“You are making me dizzy, and I am still feeling wretched.”

“Oh, you’ll get over it,” said Be-Elin, back to her usual, unsubtle self. “But me? I’m a fool!”

“Just explain, will you? I have already told you what that landlord said.”

“Alright, sit down.”

“I’m still in my bedroll!”

“So you are. Sorry, Silvi.”

Silvi had left the village of Given before dawn realising she might face more questions than she needed right now, and had jogged the two leagues up to where Be-Elin was camped. She had hardly slept the night before, so had told the dragon to wake her in a couple of hours, and had climbed into her bedroll under their canvas. When she had awoken, she had talked through the events of the night before while still wrapped up warmly, and she had no intention of getting up yet.

“So, trying not to shout at me or waving your dragon bits at me, tell me what you are stomping around about?”

“Yes, sorry.” Be-Elin sat down with a thump. “It’s all in the names,” she said.

“Whose names?” Silvi pulled her bedroll around her ears; it was colder than she liked.

“Well, not whose, really, but the place names. That village we first stopped at?”

“Henny?”

“Henny was the name of a young man from Wead-Wodder who joined Pree’s Army and trained up as a dragon rider. Later he became a scout, but he said he was going to come over to Bind if he could after the war. He must have managed to get here and met up with the other riders.”

“Not a coincidence?”

“I don’t think so. Very unusual name. Anyway, then there is Given. It didn’t even occur to me, but it is almost like a joke.”

“How?” asked Silvi.

“Well, the meeting place the dragons used for sorting out their problems was the Neuath on the isle of Taken. Actually, that is not the island’s proper name, it is called Gydaynis, but Taken was an inaccurate translation and is what it came to be called. So, Given is like the opposite.

The Draig yr Anialr and the riders didn't have much time for Taken, joking that it took forever for anything to get done there, so calling this place Given is just a silly joke."

"Sounds a stretch," said Silvi, yawning.

"But the last clue, which is the most important and most obvious one, is the name of the inn."

"The Old Man of the Plains?"

"Remember what the tavern at Ponack is called?"

"Er, Hen something?"

"Hen-Thyn, which means Old Man."

"What?"

"So, that pub, the Old Man of the Plains is a direct tribute to the rider's favourite tavern. Silvi that cannot be a coincidence. I should have at least picked up on the name of the village. I even carried Henny a couple of times." Be-Elin flopped her head down on the ground and looked into Silvi's eyes.

Silvi sat up, pulling the bedding around her shoulders. "With what that landlord said, together with the names, they not only are the descendants of the riders, but they haven't forgotten who they are, not entirely. We have found them, Elin. We have found your people."

"I know." Be-Elin blinked softly and wrapped her wing over her rider. "Now we need to work out what to do about it."

Sonaton sat at one end of the large lake Ander Sona on the northern edge of the Bekon Moors in the region of Hertenesse known as Fevindor.

"According to those traders I spoke to on the road through Onin, it might be the principal town of Fevindor now, but it's only grown up in the last couple of hundred years."

"That's why I don't recognise it then," Be-Elin called back over her shoulder. She was currently flying high over the town pretending to be a passing bird. "I used to fly this way between the Sand Hills and Tool on the west coast, and don't remember a town here."

"Are we going to land somewhere, or just keep flying in circles?"

"I'll fly into the moors a short way."

The Bekon Moors was a vast tract of land that stretched one hundred and fifty leagues north-east from the old border with Hendesse. Although not all moorland, this wild region of Bind fed the broad river Hend that cut the old province of Hendesse in two. The area of the moors ten leagues south of Lake Ander Sona was mostly hilly heathland, and unpopulated by anything other than frisky wild ponies and some currently worried goats. As they made up a basic camp, the dragon was unusually quiet.

"Right, big girl, speak to me," said Silvi, trying to raise a spark for their fire. "I know you have something on your mind. You have been distracted for the last three villages."

"I know. Silvi, we need to talk about what happens next."

The girl looked over to Be-Elin and could see that her friend was worried. "What do you mean?"

Be-Elin sat and arranged her tail around herself. "You are right. This is definitely where some of the riders made their homes, and a few of them know something of their ancestor's stories."

"Be-Elin, cough it up; I can always tell when you are trying not to say too much." Silvi smiled at the dragon who really was a hopeless liar.

"I know you can. Everyone always can, and it's very annoying! Silvi, this has always been more than about finding a home for dragons or turning you into a rider. It is also about trying to change the future, to get it back to how it should be with dragons and humans working together and not against one another."

"I know that, Elin."

"I think this place Hertenesse might be where it starts. But knowing that and making it happen seems a very long journey, and somewhere in the middle of it all, I have made you homeless and taken your future away from you."

"That was the fault of my brothers, not you."

"But if I hadn't had been there, it might have worked out differently. Your neighbours might have come to your rescue, your brothers punished, and you would still be in your lovely cottage talking to your goats."

"And in fifty years, I might still have been in my cottage talking to my goats. Be-Elin, I have travelled the length of a continent, swam in the sea with a dragon, stood on mountains, talked to people with different accents, learned to fight a bit, got myself loads fitter, and have become friends with the most beautiful of people; you. Yes, I haven't got a home and yes, I miss my friends, my horse, and even my goats, but this is me now. I'm a girl in nose to toes dragon rider leathers, carrying a longbow and knives, and wondering how Dirt has become such a mess without me noticing." The two looked at each other, Be-Elin the dragon and Silvi Farthing the rider, each trying to decide what they did now.

"Do you like it here?" asked Be-Elin.

"Is that important?"

"I think so."

"Yes, I do." Silvi put some of her wood on the fire, watching the eager flames wrap around the thin branches. "Hertenesse is not Hope. It doesn't have the peace of the island or the good weather and it's very much poorer, but it isn't stagnant either, and Hope is. This country is struggling, Elin. I know it's busy and people laugh and are working hard, but everywhere we have visited they face problems and they are only just surviving. Even the rude songs they sang at the Old Man of the Plains were trying to cover up problems that they would have to face when they woke up the next morning."

"Everything you have told me that you have seen speaks of the difficulties facing most people here, especially the last few villages you visited," said Be-Elin. "They were surprisingly primitive compared to what I remember. Simpler buildings, smaller farms, fewer people, and very basic taverns."

"There is nothing like that on Hope either," said Silvi. "That Landlord Berron said they need people like me. No one has said that to me before. Do you think we can help? Is this where we should be?"

"Perhaps you, but I am not sure about me yet."

Silvi looked up at the Draig yr Anialr. They played so often with each other and joked about everything, that it was easy to forget that this was an old, proud person who had already seen wars and death. She had watched the world crumble and her friends fight for survival.

"Elin, what needs to happen before you can stay in Bind and call it home?"

"For me personally, that has already happened. You are my rider, just as Farthing was, and I don't need anything more than that. If you do nothing else now, I will go wherever you go, and I believe you will go wherever I go."

"I will," said Silvi without hesitation. "The only way I could ever go back to my house on Hope is if there was a dragon house built next door to it." It wasn't flippant or jokey; Silvi was serious.

"And that is a dream I would love to see one day, baby dragon girl, but this is not just about you and me, and none of it is that simple. This is about my friends and my people. My home is with you, but where is their home? They want it to be here, but I still think it's not ready for them. I know some of the Draig yr Anialr could go back to Ponack or down south where you trained for those weeks, but very few would because that's not the life they want; they have that in Angyn. They have spent hundreds of years not just missing this part of the world but lamenting they have become separated from humans. Only the desert dragons continued sharing lives with humans, even before the wars and the disease. You only know a little about the relationship between dragons and riders who were fighting together, but beyond the tavern in Ponack, it went much further than that. Humans and dragons farmed together, traded together, made woven cloth together, and their children played together and grew up together. At one time, thousands of years ago, I'm told all dragons and all humans shared the world like that. But in my day, apart from the Draig yr Anialr, only the Draig Morglas had any associations with humans, and it wasn't always easy. Fren-Eirol's village used to make coin by making and selling beautiful silks and running messages for traders. But apart from one or two, humans never went into the village and dragons stayed out of Wead-Wodder. This was not just about the humans. The dragons turned their backs too, and now they're regretting it."

"Why?" asked Silvi. "You have said all this before, but I still don't understand it. If I forget you are ten times my size and have wings, you might as well be my big sister. We make the same jokes, we both like beer, we both get upset over the same things, and we even talk about sex in the same way! So why have dragons and humans grown apart?"

"I wish Eafa were here, girl," said Be-Elin. "He understood all this beyond what was remembered or written down. I sometimes think that is what he and the other ancients before him were all about. They were there to understand those things the rest of us messed up, remember them for thousands of years. But now, even the truth about them is forgotten. All I know is that apart from a bright but sad moment when some human communities on Bind decided to help dying dragons, the rift between my people and yours was devastating."

"So, are you saying the dragons won't come back?" asked Silvi, frowning. "Are you going to be the only dragon here, because of me?"

"No, I am saying the dragons want to come back, but they will want to know that this time it will be different. The journey here is hard and dangerous, Silvi. Desert dragons are the fastest of all dragons and probably the best flyers. For us, the risk is lower. But for the other dragons it is much harder, and some who try might not make it, just like some who left here five hundred years ago did not survive the journey to Angyn. So, they need to know the risk is worth the danger."

"Dear Elin, I would love to see the dragons back here. I want others to feel the love I feel for you and the love you give me back, but I would not want to see dragons die for that!"

"Nor I, but they will. If they believe this land, even just a small area, can be a real home, and bring hope for their future here, then they will risk the journey in the same way that humans will risk their lives for something important. You see, we have that in common too." The dragon smiled.

“So, what do you need?” asked Silvi. “What can I do? You are right that I think I would like to do more here in Hertenesse, see if I can help in some way, but what can I do that also helps the dragons on the other side of Dirt?”

“For you to make a home here, girl, all you need to do is make sure the people in the village are happy for you to move in. That does not work for dragons as things stand. For us to make a home we have to know the people of the country are happy about us moving in; that means the people who run the country, the rulers. Somehow, I need to find out what they think and what they believe in. Are they really hoping for the best for their people? Are they really trying to change this country for the better? Are they the sort of people who would see me and my kind as friends and not as a threat or a pack animal? I would never move to somewhere like the Kingdom of Senness; to do so would be to implicitly support their rule, and that I cannot do. But how do I find out about somewhere like Hertenesse? I can’t very well go knocking at the next castle gate and ask them!”

Silvi poked at the fire with a stick. “No, but I could.”

“How? You might have a winning smile, small one, but I am not sure that will get you rushed in to see the king.”

“I am not sure I will ever be able to see the king!” said Silvi, laughing. “But I can get closer. Remember that notice I saw at Inua Village?”

“Looking for archers?”

“Looking for archers who can use a longbow. I was intrigued when I saw it because I already know from talking to other villagers that the longbow is hardly known here. They are happy with a short bow for hunting because it’s easier to carry.”

“So, what are you suggesting, Silvi?”

“Be-Elin, all I want to do is fly off to a nice warm stretch of sand and jump in the sea with you, but I know that is a selfish longing. You are right. You cannot go knocking on the King’s front door, not yet. But if I go to Levin Burh where they are recruiting, and if they let me sign up, then I will be one step closer to finding out what you need to know. I will be working somewhere important, will have the chance to meet important people, and perhaps get you the answers you need.”

“And if you don’t get those answers or they are the wrong ones?”

“Then, dragon girl, we leave this land and find another.”

“Silvi, this is not going to be a day trip. It could take you months to get to where you need to be.”

“I know.”

“You would do that?”

“Yes, Be-Elin. I think I must. I think I need it for me too.”

“In what way?”

“I’m still only half a rider, really. I am good with a bow, very good perhaps, and I am strong and quick, but there is only a certain amount I have been able to teach myself about the sword and my knives. I might have knocked down two young farm lads, but that is all they were. I need to learn the rest now, and I know I cannot learn properly from you. You’re a dragon that can flatten me in a second if you want to; you cannot teach me what another human can.”

“No, I can’t,” said Be-Elin with a sigh. “I have known that all along, but was scared of pushing you away, Silvi.”

“You won’t; that is impossible now.”

“What will you do?”

“Go to Sonaton, buy a horse, and ride to Levin Burh. If they won’t have me, I will come back, and we can think of something else. If they will, then I join up at the castle and see what happens.”

They sat in silence while Silvi made herself something to eat, each thinking through what this meant for them. Despite some risks, a couple of bad moments, and a lot of hard work over the last seven months, what Silvi was facing now was far more dangerous and critical. Be-Elin did not like the thought of abandoning the girl. When Farthing had been her rider, she had found much of their time together frustrating. Unlike other riders, he could not spend every day with her, and Be-Inua kept her busy. The war kept them apart far more than it bound them together. She had loved him dearly but also regretted that the bond between them was never as complete as she had seen with other pairings of dragons and riders; Mab-Onin and Mistry in particular. With Silvi, the pairing, the closeness and the intimacy, was far deeper, and leaving her rider on her own was troubling and upsetting. Yet, if they were going to do this, now was the time. Winter was closing in, and that would make camping outside harder for the girl. If they did not stay here, then they would move south again or return to Ponack, both of which would take them away from where Be-Elin knew in her gut they needed to be.

Before she took Silvi to Sonaton, they first flew to Levin Burh and scouted out a clearing in the woods where they could leave messages for each other. Meeting would be difficult unless urgent and it would be unwise for the dragon to spend too much of her time hiding in the hills around the castle. So to a greater extent, Silvi would be left to her own devices, and Be-Elin would continue learning what she could about the country and its neighbours from her high-altitude viewpoint.

“I’m not abandoning you, Silvi.”

“I know, and I’m not abandoning you either.”

It was approaching dawn on a low hill overlooking Sonaton.

“Are you sure about wearing your leathers? I haven’t seen anyone else wearing clothes like yours.”

“Dragon girl, if I am about to walk into a castle and say I’m an archer and can fight, then standing there wearing a summer dress will just look silly. In these I look like I might be telling the truth, I hope.”

“You are, girl. I haven’t seen you miss a rabbit or a bird once with either bow since we left Ponack, and you took down that deer for me at more than three hundred paces without blinking.”

“That was lucky.”

“Not for the deer it wasn’t!” said Be-Elin, chuckling.

“I better go, dragon mine,” said Silvi, touching the dragon on the face. “If they don’t want me, I will see you in the clearing in a week. If they do, I will leave you a message. Now, fly away and love me lots!”

“Of course I do. Dragons love better than anyone.”

The graceful Draig yr Anialr bowed briefly, and, with a twinkle in her eye, leapt into the clouds, trying not to look back at the small figure tramping down the hillside. Flying back to the camp on the moors, she told herself the girl was stronger and far more capable than even Silvi realised, and had the will to succeed. But in her heart, Be-Elin was as scared as a baby dragon.

Back on the moors, she packed up the rest of their belongings and thought about what she would do herself over the next few weeks and possibly months. She had already decided she would stay within easy reach of her rider for the moment. Apart from her own fears, it was also

her duty, as far as she was concerned. Many of the dragons could be quite bossy with their riders, though the best of pairings were the true partnerships like Bren-Etan with Gellin and Be-Lota with Farron. Be-Elin had always wanted to do the right thing by Farthing and sometimes she had taken the back seat, just making sure she was around when he needed her. She was trying not to do that with Silvi, but it was hard. The dragon might have an occasionally caustic sense of humour, but she also tended to let her heart take over when perhaps she shouldn't.

"You have done the right thing, Be-Elin," said the small brown-haired woman, putting her foot up on the driver's seat.

"I know."

"You are scared, though."

"Much more than she is, I think. She is so young!"

"No, she's not. She is strong and she will get stronger, and she's already an incredible archer. Trust me, Elin."

"Do you need to fly anywhere?"

"Nope. Unless you can carry a wagon and four, I have other things I need to do. Watch her?"

"I will. She is my rider now. I can do nothing else."

Silvi did not waste time looking around Sonaton other than trying to find a dealer from whom she could buy a decent horse and picking up a small canvas to use for a tent. Although back in Hope she had relied on her cart more often than ride, she had ridden since she was six years old, as did everyone on the island where horses were cheap and plentiful. She was happy on large horses and ponies and loved both. Be-Elin had made sure she had plenty of funds from the dragon's seemingly bottomless purse, so she really could buy any horse she wished. Her priority, however, was to find one that was strong, fast, and well behaved and not some show pony. Having picked up another one of the notices calling for recruits, she was directed to a farm along the lake where they bred horses both for farmers and for hunters. She was sitting on the fence of a large paddock of geldings when the farmer walked over, cleaning his hands with a rag.

"Powerful animals, these," he said.

"Morning," replied Silvi. "I don't recognise them, I don't think."

"Unless you're from around here you won't. We have crossed a slightly smaller strain of the Bekon Brown with a fast black rider they like over in Preland. To be honest, we didn't intend to. We had a frisky stallion who jumped his fence, but we've been breeding them for fifty years now."

"They certainly look a good, healthy working animal, and I love that dark coat. Now you mention it, I can see the Bekon Brown in them, especially on the facial markings."

"It's misleading, really. We thought we would end up with a smaller draught horse, but these are riders through and through. Do you ride a lot?" asked the man, taking a drink from a small flask. "Rum?"

"Thanks." Silvi took a swig and handed the flask back. "One way or another, yes. These look young."

"Not broken yet, but I have a couple in the stable if you are wanting to buy. They are not cheap, girl, I need to warn you."

"I can pay if they are good." Silvi jumped down off the fence, picked up her pack and bows from the long grass, and followed the man up the short track and into the stable yard.

"You use a longbow?" asked the man in surprise. "Not very popular in Hertenesse and I have never seen a girl with one."

"I prefer it to my short bow because I can shoot three or four hundred paces without much trouble."

"That is a hell of a draw. You must have strong arms!"

"It's taken a lot of practice, sir. Nearly broke my wrist the first time I tried, and once I did get the hang of it, my shoulders ached for a month."

"I can imagine." The man looked genuinely impressed, or shocked; Silvi wasn't sure which. "I have a mare and a gelding up for sale. Both are broken, but the gelding has been ridden more and is better tempered than the mare. He is also slightly taller and thicker in the rear, which you may not want."

"Do you know which is the faster?"

"Both are quick. I have never raced them, but the gelding has slightly heavier muscles. I would be guessing, to be fair."

"I am interested, sir, so can I have a look at both of them?"

"Of course. If you wait there, let me go grab my son. He can take you up to the top pasture, and you can try both. I'm a terrible rider myself, I'm afraid!" The man laughed and headed over to the farmhouse.

"Well," said Silvi to the two horses who were looking out from their stables. "I'm sorry if I am a bit low, but hopefully, one of you will cheer me up. I had to say goodbye to a friend for a bit today. Are you two friends?" Silvi pulled out the notice again. "It says here they are looking for longbowmen who are good riders with their own horse to join a new company. So, are either of you interested in having an archer sitting on you? I wash regularly, am very sweet, and will give you apples!" Silvi chuckled at her own silliness, but she was trying to cheer herself up.

"This is my son Darin," said the farmer, returning with a boy of around twelve years old.

"Hello, I'm Silvi. Are you going to take me out with the horses?"

"That's right," replied the boy, grabbing a saddle from the rail. "We'll go up to the high pasture cos it's dry up there. Which do you prefer?"

"I will try the gelding first; see how he feels."

"Alright, miss."

The two saddled up and walked the horses out of the gate before mounting and riding up a track to the open pasture on the top of the ridge of hills that ran the length of the lake.

"Good riding country," called out Silvi, cantering up the rise, getting the feel of the big gelding.

"This is all common land up here, but it is only us and a neighbour who breeds ootheren that uses it. Want to go for a run?"

"Lead on!"

The lad pushed the mare straight into a gallop and shot off along the hill with Silvi following close behind. The horse was sleek and muscular, and Silvi felt her sombre mood slip away as she rode the gelding up alongside the mare.

Darin looked across to her, pleasure in his eyes. "Fast enough?"

"I love it!"

"See if you can keep up!" The young boy leant forward, rose out of the saddle, and the mare stretched her neck out, pulling ahead of the gelding.

"Come on, boy," said Silvi to her horse, and leant forward into the wind. The big animal dug his hooves in deep and caught up with the mare, and then pushed ahead of her.

“Yay!” shouted Darin, and matched her pace for pace. “Up to that tree, then we can swap.”

“Beat you there!” Silvi pushed the gelding harder. The big horse shoved his nose and head out flat, and she felt his muscles pulling and stretching beneath her. As she pulled up by the tree, the gelding pricked his ears up and trotted joyfully to a halt, snorting and chattering.

“You are a good rider,” commented Darin. “The horse likes you.”

“I’ve been learning a lot about balance recently,” said Silvi with a grin, realising how much of what she had learned on the back of Be-Elin helped her on a horse. She slipped down from the saddle and patted the horse on the nose. “How old are they?”

“Both are young. The mare is just four, and he is nearly five. I have been riding the gelding a bit more than the mare, but my sister has been spending time with both of them. She’s about the same size as you.” He jumped off the mare and handed her over. “Race you back?”

“You’re on!” They leapt onto the horses and raced back along the hill, laughing.

“Well?” asked the farmer when they trotted back into the stable yard.

“She’s an excellent rider, dad. I think Clarri would have a tough time keeping up.”

“That is a compliment from my boy, miss,” said the man, hopping down off the fence, and walking over. “He idolises his big sister.”

“Only when she’s riding, dad. She stinks the rest of the time.”

“Well, sort of idolises her, then. So, Silvi, are you interested?”

“Depending on the price and what you can do on tack for me, yes.”

“Alright then. Darin, you sort the horses out, and I will take Miss Silvi to the house.”

“Yes, dad.”

Silvi had only bought one horse before in her life, and on the Isle of Hope horses were cheap. As she trotted up the road on the gelding with a decent saddle and full set of saddlebags, her head was spinning over the price. She had already looked at prices at the liveries in town, so she was fairly sure she had not been ripped off. The farmer had thrown in some spare shoes, a halter, a couple of lead ropes, an old hunting breastplate, and a few other bits and pieces like hoof picks.

“I suppose we need a name for you, young man,” she said to the gelding, trotting along the main road by the lake. “I suppose we could call you Sona after the lake, or maybe Hert after the kingdom. My horse back home is called Telli. She’s a bit cute; you would like her.” Silvi became thoughtful. “I hope she’s alright with the girls,” she said to herself. “What would be the boy version? Tello? Tell? Not sure if I want to shout that out in the morning. I suppose we could name you after a dragon. Bren-Aneirin was Fren-Eirol’s husband. There was Bren-Diath, I think that was his name. Or even Onin, of course. But then, someone has already used that for a village name.” Silvi fidgeted and adjusted her leathers. However much she had enjoyed the gallop across the hill, she had not been on a horse for months, and her bum felt the wrong shape. “Got it! I forgot there is a great old tradition of naming horses going back to the time of my great-great-great-loads-more-granddaddy. Well, it probably never became a family tradition as such, but Be-Elin certainly remembered it. So, in honour of my personal hero, Mr Johnson Farthing, I name you... Horse!”

Levin Burh, going by the simple map she had bought in Sonaton, was at the foot of forested hills called the Tolon Hills. She already knew the hills were larger than shown on the map, but then she had had the luxury of flying over them three days earlier, and had marked up a couple of

landmarks that were missing from the rough sketch. She had taken her time travelling the twenty-five leagues from Lake Ander Sona, mostly to make sure she wouldn't arrive with saddle sores, but also to give her time to find out more about the area. Despite stopping at several villages during the weeks, she had not managed to work out a way of finding out everything she needed to know without the conversations sounding contrived and making people suspicious. Asking just a couple of questions at each village seemed to be the better strategy. Silvi had decided that playing the farm girl travelling to meet her husband had probably had its day, and dressing up little and innocent while she was on her way to join up at the Burh as an archer was daft. So, she had stayed in her leathers. It had certainly got her noticed by a few, but those she was interested in, the shopkeepers and landlords, didn't appear to care.

"Stout or Plain?" asked the big woman behind the counter at the White Pony in Ressen Valley, a hamlet less than a league west from the castle.

"Plain, please. Any food?"

"Just ham soup and bread tonight, love."

"Suits me fine," said Silvi. "It's getting cold out there."

"Looks like you are well wrapped in those clothes."

"Still gets to my nose!"

The woman laughed. "It is a bit red, dear. Here you go. Three in all."

Silvi paid over the three coins and took her beer to a table close to the fire. It was quiet in the small inn, but she fancied sitting and mulling over what she had found out in the last few days. Hertenesse bordered three small countries on the south-east and south. Penesse was the least populated and consisted of the bulk of Bekon Moors. The two more interesting countries were Tulinor to the immediate south and Calon to the south-east. Both countries were controlled by feuding families who wrested control from each other generation after generation, declaring themselves as king, and relying on the feudal system to govern their people. Relations with the two countries has been in slow decline for forty or more years, and Calon in particular, tested the border with Hertenesse regularly. For the local people, their chief concern was with small gangs that came over the border looking to raid farms and villages of everything from cattle to beer and even girls. Local militia organised by village elders had tried to reduce the threat as much as possible, but now the King had decided he should do more. This was part of the reason for increasing the size of the garrison at Levin Burh.

"Here you are, love," said the large woman. "Are you going to the Burh?"

"Yes, I am. They are recruiting archers."

"You look young to go sign up for something like that, girl."

"They need people who can use a longbow and I need the coin."

"We certainly need something. It's hard enough in Fevindor to get trade through from the south, but with bandits coming up from Calon and Tulinor, it's making it impossible sometimes. I know the King is trying hard, but I wonder if anything can be done by anyone. Anyway, dear, enough of my prattle. Enjoy your soup. Do you want to stay the night? We have two small rooms up above the kitchen. Nice and warm."

"I wasn't going to, but it's later than I planned. Have you a stable for my horse?"

"Just round the back, dear. You can put him in with our old Bekon."

"Thank you, ma'am. My name is Silvi."

"I'm Hilda. A pleasure to meet you."

The soup was good and the fire warm. Silvi paid the landlady for the room and stabling, then slipped outside as soon as she had eaten to deal with her horse and take her things up to the

tiny attic room above the kitchen. She was tempted to go to bed there and then, but decided to spend another hour down by the fire first. There were a handful more locals in the common room when she got back downstairs, and two well-built men dressed more like mercenaries.

"We only got the one room now, sir, so either you both cram in or you can take the loft over the stable."

"We were told you have two rooms, lady."

"I do, but one is already filled."

"Well, un-fill it!"

"That I cannot do, sir. The girl has paid for the room so it is hers until morning."

"Listen, lady. We are on our way to Levin Burh to sign up with the King's men."

"Good for you, sir, but this is a free house owned by my man and me, not by the King. You left his rules when you stepped off the road. In here it's my rules."

"Leave it, Jon," said the second man. "We can ride on up to the Burh tonight."

"I am not leaving it, Horan. King's men are king's men in any land. I don't grovel to no serf!"

The room had fallen quiet during the exchange, and Silvi slipped her hand to her side and unstrapped her knife.

"Jon, I think we should leave."

"Why? Cos of some nervous serfs?"

"No, because this land doesn't have serfs," Silvi heard herself say.

"Who are you?" The big man turned to look at Silvi.

"I'm the girl who has paid for the room that you want and won't be getting." Silvi was taking a huge risk, she knew, but she was betting the word serf had really upset the locals. The man named Jon turned away from the counter and stepped towards her. Silvi stayed sitting, but she now had both knives out of their scabbards under the table.

"So, are you the local whore or something?"

"Jon, leave it!"

"Shut it, Horan."

"Sorry, girl," said the other man. "He had a flask of bitter rum on the road."

"I said shut it, Horan!" The big man span around to face Horan in a rage, pulling his sword. That was all Silvi needed. She kicked away her table, jumped up on a stool and crowned the big man with the butt of her knife, hard. He stopped in his tracks in shock and turned around, his blade swinging towards the girl. Silvi ducked under the sword and punched him in the groin, then the stomach and finally, hard in the nose, twice. There was a sickening crack, and he hit the ground, out cold, blood running from his nose.

"Shit!" said Horan. The man looked around at the locals, standing in silence, obviously angry. "I'm sorry. He is my brother, and he shouldn't drink."

"I think he's bloody lucky he's breathing, son," barked Hilda. "Get him out of here!"

Horan bent down and heaved his larger brother up under the arms. "Sorry, girl," he said to Silvi. "He had that coming. I should have done it myself." With that, he dragged his brother out of the inn, dumped him across his horse, and they galloped off up the road towards Levin Burh.

Silvi let out a breath, put her knives away, and righted her table. "Sorry," she said across the room to Hilda. "I don't like bullies. I have a brother like him."

"And he's still living?" Hilda laughed, and Silvi smiled back in embarrassment. She knew what she had done was stupid. If both men had been thugs and sober, she wouldn't have stood a

chance, she was sure. There was no question about it; if she was going to do idiotic things like that, she had to get a lot better and quickly.

“Here you go,” said an old man, putting a pot of stout on her table. “That is from me. We all love our Hilda. So, thanks.”

“Thank you, sir; though I might have made it worse.”

“Well, you didn’t, and his face is going to be a right picture in the morning too!” The old bloke chuckled and wandered back to his friends.

Silvi played with her breakfast in the morning thinking about her ridiculous actions the night before. There had been no reason for her to get involved, but she had wanted to, and that had left her feeling annoyed at herself. She was the only one in the common room, and her breakfast had been served by Hilda’s husband; a small, quiet man.

“Problem, girl?” Hilda appeared with the jug of coffee and poured Silvi one and one for herself.

“I should be riding up to the Burh.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

“Last night, Hilda. I’m not from around here, I am from the far south, but had to leave.”

“Those brothers you mentioned?”

“I had a tiny farm, but they don’t think a woman should have something like that without a husband, so they set fire to it. A friend got me out of there.”

“That is rough, girl. I’m sorry. What are you doing up here in Hertenesse?”

“Been looking for a place where people want what I want. I thought I’d found it.”

“You picked a difficult land, girl; that is for sure. Nothing is easy up this end of Bind. But the people, well, most of the people, they are good here in Hertenesse.”

“But what if when I get up to the Burh, they are all like that man last night? What does that say?”

“It would say the King, or rather his brother, is getting something very wrong, dear. But that would surprise me.”

“His brother?”

“His younger brother; Sir Hal. He’s in charge of sorting out the problems on the border. He is based at Levin Burh.”

“What is he like?”

“Can’t say I’ve met him,” said Hilda, smiling. “But I ain’t heard nothing bad about him if that is what you mean. I know he decided to become a knight rather than be called a prince. That might say something to the good; I don’t know really. I would be surprised if he wanted a castle full of men like that. Doesn’t fit somehow.”

“I’m probably being stupid, I know that,” said Silvi, drinking her coffee.

“How old are you, girl?”

“Twenty-three.”

“I see.” Hilda looked at Silvi with her head on one side. “Well, I won’t contradict you because you did good by me last night, though I can see it worries you. I will say that you should be careful, you hear? Unless you got a bloody great big friend hiding somewhere, of course!” The woman grinned, stood up, and went behind the counter. “Breakfast is on me and so are the oats what we gave your horse this morning. Now, you go up to that castle and show them what good people are for!” With a laugh verging on a cackle, Hilda left to go back into her kitchen.

"I nearly went the other way, Horse," said Silvi. Despite the kindly encouragement from the landlady of the White Pony, by the time the young woman had saddled up Horse, she had been tempted to forget the kingdom, forget all about dragons, and just turn south to Hope. Even though her legs wanted to go that way, both her heart and her head knew that she couldn't and shouldn't. So now, here she was, looking at the gates of a rundown old castle in a forest of fir trees. Horse snorted impatiently.

"Yes, I know." Silvi nudged the animal into a walk and rode in through the barbican.

The inner ward of the castle was busy with soldiers and servants going about their morning chores, and two pikemen approached the girl, barring the way.

"Your business?"

"I saw a notice you are looking for archers who are experienced with the longbow."

"We are, but ain't you a bit small to pull a longbow?"

"If you mean do I trip over it, then no." Silvi had expected the odd comment and was trying to keep her patience.

"Fair enough, girl. Tie your horse in front of the stables over through that gate to the outer ward and then report to Sergeant Deffane in the guardhouse behind you."

"Thank you, sir," replied Silvi, and walked her horse across the inner ward and through the arch to the large stables area.

This was a daunting place. It was in serious need of repair and the walls towered high above her, the green and black of the stone and moss making the chilly autumn morning feel more like darkest winter. There were three other horses already tied to the bar, each still laden with an interesting assortment of saddlebags and kit.

"I hope you're feeling social, Horse," said Silvi, taking her longbow and quiver from where they were strapped to the side of her saddle and slinging them across her back. "I think this castle is designed to make small girls feel even smaller. What do you think?" Horse snorted, and chomped on the slice of apple she fed him. "Well, wish me luck."

When she reported to the guardhouse, she was told to wait down by the kitchen with the other three who were already there, and Sergeant Deffane would be across in a minute. Silvi wondered whether she would run into the two brothers from the previous night, but it was a different three men waiting by the kitchen.

"Hello," said Silvi, walking over. Two of the men smiled and one, a man in his early forties, nodded politely. He had a particularly beautiful and well-polished longbow that looked like it had seen many hours of use.

"Trying out as an archer?" he asked.

"Yes, I am."

"Haven't seen a longbow in the hands of a woman before."

"A few have said that. I prefer it to the short bow, though."

"So do I, even for close-range work."

Silvi nodded and smiled. She had no idea what to expect this morning; whether they were trying people out, training them, just signing them up, or what. But she didn't dare ask in case she looked foolish.

"Heads up!" A big man strode over from the gate wearing a worn, leather jerkin and britches, and sporting a long beard. "I am Sergeant Deffane, and I will be testing you on whether you can shoot those things or not." The man looked over the four hopefuls, and his eyes landed on Silvi. "Who are you, girl?"

"Silvi, sir. Silvi Goatherd."

"Well, Silvi, jobs for serving girls are over in the great hall; go on with you."

"Sorry?"

"I said go on. You are in the wrong place."

"No sir, I am here because you are looking for archers."

"Really?" The big sergeant took his own bow from his back. "Girl, this is a longbow. The draw weight on this is ninety pounds. You could never pull it an inch."

"But I have my own." Silvi was completely confused.

"Well, tell daddy it was a lovely present, but you need something half the size. Right. You three with me!" The sergeant turned and marched towards the gate.

"Sergeant!" Silvi rushed after the man. "I have ridden leagues to get here. At least let me try out!"

The big man turned on the spot. "Forget it, girl. You might have tough looking clothes and a big horse, but you don't belong here trying to pull a bow!" The big man leant right forward. "Now get on your horse, and get out of my castle!" He turned and led the other three away out of the gate, leaving Silvi standing in the middle of the inner ward, laughed at by a couple of passing soldiers. She turned on her heel, marched to the stables, grabbed Horse, and led him back out of the castle. She was in shock and spitting mad.

"How dare he!" she shouted at no one, turning down a small avenue of trees out of sight of the rest of the world. "Girls can't pull bows?" She grabbed her longbow from her back and strung it up, muttering under her breath. "Stupid old git! What does he know?" With a flick, she nocked an arrow, aimed it at an innocent fir tree more than two hundred paces down the avenue and shot off a small branch. "Can't aim, eh?" She nocked another arrow and took off the next branch down. "Probably will starve because wimpy girls can't shoot!" She sliced off the next one down with a broadhead. "Maybe I have to teach the birdies to sit still, just for silly, girly me!" She nailed a passing pigeon to the tree. "Ninety pounds? What sort of wimp is he?" She buried an arrow deep into the trunk. "Well try this..." She shot off another branch. "Bow!" And another. "It!" She pruned another branch from the tree. "Is!" The tree took another hit. "One hundred and ten!" The tree got one right in the middle of the trunk. "Pounds!" The last arrow split the previous arrow right down the centre.

"Excuse me?"

"What?" Silvi whirled around with an arrow already nocked and on the verge of loosing it, to be confronted by a surprised knight standing by her horse. "Oh shit!" She lifted her bow hurriedly and shot the arrow over the man's head. The knight ducked and then looked up at the girl. "I'm sorry," said Silvi. "I was angry."

"So I saw. Though I think the tree probably needs more of an apology than I do. Not to mention the pigeon."

"I really am sorry. I better go."

"Just wait a minute," said the knight. "Why were you angry?"

"Some stupid git of a man refused to let me try out for the longbow."

"Oh." The knight took another look at the tree. "Could you wait here for a moment?"

"I suppose."

"Thank you, miss."

The knight turned and walked out of the avenue, picking up the stray arrow that she had nearly shot him with. Silvi sighed. She had no idea who this was and why he had crept up behind her. The kingdom used knights to patrol roads and keep the peace, though from what she

could see they were not heavily armoured, not like in the stories her aunt had told her of the knights over in Preland. Silvi draped her bow across her shoulder and looked down at the tree.

“Well, that wasted a pile of arrows and I won’t be able to reach them. Be-Elin is going to give me right telling off, Horse. She should do too.”

“This way, sergeant!”

Silvi turned back around to see the knight return with Sergeant Deffane in tow.

“Oh, sod it,” she said to herself.

“Excuse me, miss,” said the Knight politely, but firmly. “Sergeant Deffane has confirmed to me that he was reluctant to try you out. He is a very good man and the only archer in my employ who uses the longbow. So, we are all learning, understood?” It was polite, but it was formal and insistent.

“I understand,” said Silvi, a little quietly.

“Good. Now, sergeant, can you shoot that branch off from that tree on the right?”

“Possibly, sir.”

“Good. Do so.”

The tree was about a hundred paces down on the right of the avenue and had a long, thin, errant branch sticking out to the left. The sergeant strung his bow, nocked an arrow, and took careful aim. It was a good shot, and the thin branch bounced, touched by the arrow.

“Nicely done, sergeant. Now, I am late so I will not mess around with the two of you. Miss, can you see the pigeon you shot earlier?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Good. Put two more arrows into it as fast as you can. Now!”

Silvi whipped the bow off her shoulder and shot two arrows in quick succession straight into the pigeon.

“Bloody hell,” muttered sergeant Deffane.

“Thank you miss,” the knight said. “Sergeant, sign her up and put her together with that man Tellor, and I want to see the three of you upstairs after lunch, because we have a problem.” The knight turned and marched back out of the avenue of trees leaving the two archers staring at each other.

“I owe you an apology, miss,” said the sergeant, putting out his hand.

“I owe you one for swearing at you, sir,” said Silvi, shaking his hand nervously.

“I don’t remember you swearing.”

“You weren’t here at the time.” Silvi pointed at the tree with arrows sticking out all over the place. “If I can borrow a rope, I would like to get my arrows back.”

Tellor turned out to be the man she had spoken to outside the kitchen, and he was waiting in the guardroom when Silvi and Deffane entered.

“Tellor, this is Silvi Goatherd,” said the sergeant. “She is a better shot than you, it turns out.”

The man grinned. “I thought she might be.”

“Why didn’t you say something?” retorted the sergeant in annoyance. “Might have saved me from looking like an idiot in front of Sir Hal!”

Silvi’s eyes opened wide in surprise, but she kept her mouth shut.

“Sorry, sergeant, but it is the bow she’s carrying. You don’t see many of those and never in the hands of someone who can’t shoot. What is it? A hundred?” he asked Silvi.

“Hundred and ten,” she replied.

“That is a lot of pull for anyone, especially a young woman.”

“I do get tired after a quiver, but I’m getting better.”

Deffane rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “Well, Sir Hal wants us to meet him after lunch. The two of you go to the stables and get your horses stabled properly. One moment.” Deffane leant out of the door. “Private!”

“Sir?” A young man trotted in.

“Find these two stabling for their horses and then show them up to the loft so they can dump all their gear. Then take them to the kitchens and I’ll meet you all there. Off you go.”

“Yes, sergeant,” said Silvi and Tellor.

“Just Deffane for you two. I will explain later.”

The loft turned out to be above the stables and was a long room within the sloping roof with small windows beneath the eaves.

“Are we sleeping here?” Tellor asked the private. The room was totally bare.

“I think so, sir,” replied the private. “Ask the sergeant and if you are, we have pallets and tables in the stores. Just put your bags anywhere. No one will come up here because it’s off limits.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know sir, that’s all I have been told.”

“Oh, bloody hell!” muttered Silvi when they walked back across the inner ward to the kitchens.

“What’s wrong?” asked Tellor.

“Those two big men over there by the guardhouse?”

“What about them?”

“See the one with the smashed nose? I did that last night.”

Tellor grinned. “Did he deserve it?”

“Yes. He shouted at Hilda at the White Pony in Ressen Valley.”

“Think he’ll want revenge?”

“Possibly.”

“Well, could be interesting. Food first.”

It was a bit early for lunch, but there was already stew and bread cooking in the kitchens and the cook ladled them out two big bowls.

“One for me too, Cherry,” said Deffane, marching in. “Grab your bowls and bring them into the small hall. No one is in there.” They took their hot bowls of stew and a big round of bread and went into a small hall built against the wall of the castle. Sitting down on the benches at the rough tables, the sergeant took off his jacket and looked at the two archers. “First of all, my apologies, Silvi. I have only had six women try out, and none of them could pull the bow, let alone fire an arrow. But then I have also had fifty men try out and the only one who could shoot without training is Tellor here. Still, just because I have had a bad month, I should not have taken it out on you.”

“I am sorry too, sergeant. I have been a bit sensitive about a few things.”

“So I heard. And don’t you worry about it. Jon is going to Hilda to apologise, and then he is going to apologise to you. However, at some point, I would like to know how someone only five and a half feet tall can take down a man nearly a foot taller that has been fighting for ten years, even if he was drunk. Now we have that crap out of the way, I will explain the problem that Sir

Hal is going to hit us with.” The sergeant took a big spoonful of stew and picked up a lump of bread. “Back in the feudal past, the kingdom was full of knights poncing around waving spears and longswords. Since all the neighbours were doing more or less the same thing, that was all right. We in Hertenesse have now killed off feudalism completely, and some of our neighbours have turned, quite frankly, barbaric. We know that we need to change the way we work because we are not defending our villages properly, and the people are not just poor but frightened too. Now they’re all freemen, we must earn their loyalty not demand it, and we are not doing a good job. Sir Hal wants to create a company of irregular infantry who can patrol the borders, and another of archers who can work directly under him, be prepared to go anywhere, and can operate either side of the border quietly.”

“Is that why we don’t call you sergeant?”

“Correct, Tellor, and you won’t have a uniform or any other standard equipment either. We will pay you enough to maintain your own. We can’t go sneaking around where we shouldn’t be if people keep using ranks accidentally.”

“So, what is the problem?” asked Silvi.

“With the irregulars, nothing. We recruited the last two this morning, and I am sure we can repair his nose. They are all commanded by Sergeant Mennon. You will like him, girl; he has four daughters and takes women very seriously.” The sergeant grinned evilly. “But with archers, well I wasn’t joking. The longbow is hardly known in the Kingdom or anywhere around here, to be honest. I am not from Bind originally, but from the Southern States in Preland, and everyone I knew used a longbow. I moved here twenty years ago as a mercenary, but I liked this country so stayed and joined the king’s guards. Anyway, I knew not many used them, but it didn’t occur to me I would find no one who could shoot one. If Sir Hal had not dragged me out this morning, I would only have one of you.”

“How many do you need?” asked Tellor.

“A hundred.”

“Oh.”

“And you have two of us?” asked Silvi.

“Yes, and you have just been promoted.”

“Sorry?”

“This is what Sir Hal is going to ask us shortly. He is going to tell us to find a hundred ordinary archers or even non-archers and train them to be as good as you two. So, from now on, you are in charge of training. I will be honest; both of you are better than me.”

“That should be fun,” said Tellor with a smile.

“I’m not good enough to train someone!” said Silvi, her eyes like saucers.

“Girl, I went back and looked at what you did earlier. Apart from putting three arrows in a pigeon, you have more or less dismantled a fir tree.”

“Over what distance?” asked Tellor.

“Two hundred and seventy paces. I checked,” replied Deffane.

“And the pigeon?”

“Sir Hal says she hit it mid-flight and nailed it to the tree. He told her to shoot it twice more, and she did within seconds.”

Tellor turned to Silvi and smiled. “Oh, you are more than good enough to teach others,” he said. “Though we might have to find you a box to stand on.”

“What about our quarters, sergeant, I mean Deffane?” asked Silvi.

“Sorry, you are sharing, girl, so I hope you are not shy. I know there is no furniture up there, but we will sort it. Because some of the work we will do might need to be kept quiet, it will be off limits and archers only. There are twice as many irregulars, so they are billeted in barracks behind the castle. If there is nothing else, I need to go. Stay here till I send for you.”

Deffane left and went to check whether Sir Hal was ready to talk about his new company of longbow archers and trainers; all three of them. Tellor stood, picked up a flagon of mild beer from a side table, and poured them each a mug.

“You know, I come from a very old family that has lived in this kingdom for five hundred years. We’re not from here originally, but from over in the Eastern Plains. We’re all descended from two people who travelled from the east called Gellin and Feline. To be honest, I know nothing about them except they were archers and fighters, but some of their weapons have become family heirlooms. So, are you going to tell me why you carry rider’s knives, rider’s bows, and wear rider’s leathers?”

“No.”

“Fair enough.”

Chapter 6 - Healer

"I am sorry, Terran, but I could do nothing for her." Ferret hated these moments, especially when people trusted her to the point of assuming she could work wonders; whatever her skills, they were never up to that.

"I know, Ferret. I will go and tell her brother. He will want to bury her as that is his way, I believe."

"I will wrap her, but I cannot keep her more than a day."

"He will understand. I will send someone with a cart later. Are you leaving again soon?"

"Yes, but the door will be open if I am not here, and I will only be gone a few days."

"You are a mysterious woman sometimes, Ferret."

"I think that is a compliment, Terran. I will pretend it is, just in case it isn't." The knight smiled, turned his horse, and trotted back along the forest trail to Weidess Burh. "Oh, dear," said Ferret to herself, walking back into her cottage and to the dead woman who was lying on her cot. "If people could just learn to treat wounds properly, then we wouldn't have such a sad end for such a young person."

Three things killed people before their time more than anything else, as far as Ferret could see; sickness in winter, starvation, and infections. One way or another, most of those were preventable at little cost and all three seem to defeat everyone's attempts at finding a solution, even here in poor old Kend. Ferret wrapped the body in a couple of large sheets and tied them up with light cord. Even after five hundred years, some of that time spent as a wandering healer, she still found this painfully difficult. Especially since her mother had also died from infection. The surreptitious fidgeting from behind her cottage was a welcome distraction.

"I can hear you, dear one!"

"I'm sure I should be able to knock or say hello first without you just knowing I'm here, shorty!"

"Say that again and I will bite you on the knees, old boy," called out Ferret.

"You do realise I am only about fifty years older than you?" Mab-Abin the dragon sounded almost petulant.

"Oh, pish! Have you brought me anything nice? I need cheering up." Ferret walked to the rear of her cottage, washing her hands in the small stream on the way, and hugged the huge head that had been lowered for that very purpose.

"Your spare bow from the villa, rider girl, since you managed to break the last one."

"Not my fault!"

"Yes, it was! You got it jammed between those two rocks."

"Possibly." Ferret leant back against the dragon and ran her hand through her hair.

"Doesn't seem to have cheered you up any."

“Sorry, Abin, but I have had another young woman die of an infection just because she didn’t deal with a cut properly. It was far too late for me to heal; the damage was done. Winter is coming on all too fast as well. Do we need to go?”

“If we’re to see the lighting of the Beacon, then yes, but it won’t take long.”

“This is going to be hard for you, Abin. She was your rider.”

“And my friend, but we must find out what this is all about. Farthing and Pree feared ritual and icons and I agree with them.”

“As do I. Is it tomorrow night?”

“Yes. We should go soon. It will be busy and I won’t be able to land very close.”

“I will find something warm to wear. Oh, I miss the villa! It might only be a hundred leagues farther south than here, but it is so much warmer with the currents from the Missing Sea.”

“The weather is pleasant there just now. I had a paddle in the surf.”

“Don’t tell me that!” Ferret stomped back around the cottage and headed inside.

“Oh, you really are a touchy little dragon today!” complained Mab-Abin, padding after her. “Anyway, you will be glad to know that all is fine. The villa has been locked up for the winter and everything is pruned and ready for the spring.”

“Mab-Abin, I reckon that one day I am going to wake up to find you wearing a big tatty hat and a tool belt, and you will be plodding between the olive trees, happy as anything.”

“What can I say? I like the villa and all your trees. Need more vines though if we are going to produce that wine. Can we buy more from somewhere?” The Draig yr Anialr was lying on the grass in the small glade, his chin resting on the ground.

“If you like, dear,” called out Ferret patiently. “I have to replant every once in a while, anyway. How many more?”

“That land behind you towards the hill, who owns it?”

“Unclaimed now and has been for the last century. That is a lot of land, Abin.” The young woman, as she would appear to the casual observer, came back out of the cottage in her riding leathers and swung the door shut behind her.

“Do we have to claim it?” The dragon looked puzzled.

“Probably. I know you don’t understand landownership, but if you are going to start planting vines, then you probably have to do something official, however strange you find it.”

“So, what do I do? Put up a sign saying claimed by Mab-Abin the Dragon?”

“That would take some explaining,” said Ferret, chuckling. “How about we talk about it when we next go back?”

“Yes, mummy dragon,” replied Mab-Abin like a child. He ran a casual claw down Ferret’s back as she passed.

“That tickled!”

“Just seeing if your wings are growing yet.”

“Daft animal!” Ferret climbed up on his back and tucked her bag under his. “Hey, what have you got in here?”

“Skins for a new set of hides. I need to work on them a bit more. I thought I would do that while you’re up the mountain.”

“About time; these are getting hard and rough.”

“Softy! Hang on, I just need to check no one is looking our way.” The big dragon stood up straight and stretched his neck to peek over the trees, then leapt into the air and flapped up into the low, autumn clouds.

Ferret's life had taken an interesting turn over the summer. For the past five hundred years, she had become a creature of well-worn habit. Most of the time she had lived in her ancient villa tending her olives and vines. Every so often, when the problem of never growing older looked like it might be an issue, she would vanish for a few years and pretend to be someone else. Quite often, this would involve living in the far south of Preland, and then at other times she would just get in a wagon and wander around the western shires offering the services of a healer. When she felt she would be forgotten enough, she would go back home for another forty or fifty years.

Now a dragon had turned up, had told her pointedly she had been sitting on her pretty little bum too long, and it was passed time she thought about who she was and help the dragons to return. The original plan had been to find where those riders who had come over to the former Prelates had settled, and track down their descendants. They knew many had travelled to the south-east coast, some to Axen and most much further south to Cartenor. But in the intervening five hundred years, they must have spread out and moved and mingled and they had found no useful names or links to the past at all.

Although Mab-Abin had grown despondent, Ferret had her father's interest in the ordinary people and their affairs. She had travelled across the Southern States of Preland in a wagon, learning more about the small kingdoms that had grown up, the warlords, the bandits, and the areas of the continent that were now almost entirely ungoverned. Pree would have been saddened by what Ferret had found. For the first few decades, the small states had tried to work together like one big country with a central federal government, but it was directionless, badly organised, too spread out, and had eventually collapsed. Several little wars later, a couple of devastating droughts, and the near ruin of the main trading routes, and the population was now half the size with many people living in primitive, isolated communities or under the control of ruthless local barons. The entire land felt like it had slipped back thousands of years.

Then in the middle of this mess of a continent, up by the Red Mountains, they had discovered the Kingdom of Kend and King Hornan Liander. In contrast to some of the leaders in Preland, he was struggling to make a decent land for his people and protect them from his neighbours. Ferret wasn't sure quite why she knew this was where she and Mab-Abin should be, but she did. As far as she was concerned, if the dragons were going to return and work alongside the humans with whom they shared this world of Dirt, then Kend is where it would start.

"Why do they hold this now in the winter?" she asked the dragon. "I thought Pree died earlier in the year. Or that is what my mother told me when I was little."

"I don't know," said Mab-Abin over his shoulder. "It may not be connected to her death that directly."

Farthing had lit the first beacon at the end of the war with Tekkinmod's Haftens, though it had really been Pree's funeral pyre. Mab-Abin had already left for Bind with his sister Be-Elin and they had not known that Pree had been killed. Ferret was a little uncertain how he had found out the truth, he was altogether rather vague about a lot of things, but she had been reluctant to put him on the spot. If you learn nothing else by living five centuries, it was to be patient for a few months or even decades.

"Well, we shall see," she said. "All I have ever known is that it celebrated the birth of Preland, though when I was growing up in Evana's ducal court, it was still called The Prelates. To be honest, I can't think now when it changed. Evana always said the lighting of the Beacon was a one-off event, and it was the change of the name of the mountain that was important."

"Your memory is nearly as bad as mine, Eiferra," said the dragon, laughing.

"Embarrassing! I wonder if Weasel had that problem?"

“Your father remembered everything; it was one of his most annoying traits. But you can’t remember what you don’t know.”

“Thank you, oh wise one! Now, you get on with the flying while I put my other coat on.”

“Certainly, Ancient!”

“Oh, please!”

“Sorry.”

Ferret, or Eiferra to use her proper name, knew more about being an Ancient than Weasel had known for most of his life. She had her grandmother Sen-Liana’s book, notes from Weasel himself, and a very few from her own mother who had added the little Sen-Liana had told her on her final visit, and that Fren-Eirol had told her on the terrible day she had returned with Weasel’s body. But knowing that you were not a magician as others thought of them, and knowing you were something of a dragon and also a human and called an Ancient, was rather different from having a big sandy-coloured friend bowing and scraping in front of you simply to take the piss. To all intents and purposes, Ferret felt human most of the time, except those few times, like now, when she didn’t. She brushed her friend’s mind with her own.

“You are worried, Abin.”

“Yes, I am,” replied Mab-Abin quietly. He would have dearly loved to have stayed far away from this spectacle. But although he would not be on the actual mountain, he would watch from a distance, and he was reasonably sure it would make him angry.

“We don’t know who these people are, my love, and it is not like this is something celebrated throughout Preland; those in Kend know nothing of it.” Ferret put her hand on the dragon’s neck and stroked his mind in a way only an Ancient could do.

“I know you hate being called an Ancient, Eiferra, but you, like Eafa, know how to make me feel better and stronger. I am glad you are who you are and that you are my rider.”

“Soppy git!” Ferret smacked him on the neck, but her smile was warm. “I will learn what we need to learn, dear one, and we will return to my cottage and order in a barrel of beer.”

“Beer! Another thing you and your father have in common, except that you get drunk for real.”

Ferret shrugged innocently, and lay down to avoid the cold wind that was blowing over the dragon.

Mab-Abin sailed silently over Lake Sendyn to the quieter forests to the north. Below them, flickered countless tiny fires from the pilgrims camping by the woods before they took the final walk to the ruins of Heldon Burh and up the steep path to The Beacon of Hope. Five hundred years earlier, the dragon had scouted briefly in this area. But then he had been sent away by Pree and Farthing, ordered on the authority of Bren-Diath to abandon his rider and see to his own people who were being mercilessly slaughtered by a simple, uncaring disease. It had been the right thing to do, and he and Be-Elin had spent the time before they left from Bind finding the few remaining dragon communities, encouraging them to fly to Angyn, or comforting them in their last hours. But however good this logical argument, he had never forgiven himself for not being here when Pree had needed him most. Any who had not been in a pairing with a Draig yr Anialr could not understand the deep bond of friendship and love that grew between the dragon and the human. In some ways, he had that again, but Eiferra was an Ancient, and it was a different relationship, though they loved each other as friends. His heart, however, still ached for Pree.

He landed quietly a league north of the forest and stood quietly while Ferret slipped from his back in the dark and changed out of her leathers into the ordinary clothes worn by people throughout the north.

“Will you be able to find this glade again?” Ferret asked the dragon, stroking his face.

“I may not have your skills, but I have better normal night sight than you, little dragon.” Mab-Abin tried to lift his own mood. “Eafa might have avoided a lot of trouble in his life if he realised how much of his luck was actually him being an Ancient. Though I think he also was lucky sometimes.”

“I think so too. I’m still learning. Mind you, being able to find my way around in pitch darkness was one of the first things I learned, much to Evana and Seran’s annoyance. I used to go regularly for little night-time expeditions around her father’s castle, including catching the two of them in a wonderfully compromising moment!” Ferret bent down and tied her boots more tightly. “I bet these end up chafing. You don’t need to stay. You can meet me here at dawn the day after tomorrow if you wish.”

“I know, but I owe it to Pree to witness this, even from a distance,” said the dragon. “This was my war too.”

“I understand. Once I return from the mountain, I will come straight here; we will not stay longer than we need.” The woman smiled at her friend and trotted into the woods. “Bloody boots!” she called over her shoulder, disappearing into the night.

Mab-Abin curled up in the glade, closed his eyes and pushed the violence of the old war from his mind. Instead, he took himself back to the time in the Eastern Plains when he and Pree were first learning about each other. No one had heard of the disease then, and Pree was secluded in her small cottage on the Isle of Hope at a time when her forces had yet to commit to the final push against Henry and Tekkinmod. His own world was still simple and predictable. They were fighting against the restless peoples of the plains, defending the Pharsil-Hin, and though they all knew that change was inevitable, the collapse of Bind and the death of so many dragons was something inconceivable. For a few days during this hiatus, as they made their way up from the south of Bind, he and Pree had played. They had flown together, swam together, watched the dawn and the dusk, and all but danced together.

It was a ritual of sorts that all dragons and riders went through, but for some reason, this had been more natural and instinctive than some. The young woman, not much more than a girl, had captured his heart. When on Angyn he had learned of Pree’s death from Fren-Eirol, he had fallen into the deepest despair. He had taken himself away to the eastern mountains and hid for more than a year. He, like many, had seen Mistry’s pain after the death of Mab-Onin. Though they had all sympathised and celebrated both as heroes, even riders and dragons had found the heartbreak in her eyes hard to comprehend and harder still to watch. The loss of Pree had hurt him in the same way. He would stay in this glade for the next day working quietly on his new hides, and tomorrow night he would fly high above the mountain, ignore the ritual below, and reach into the past to live through the lighting of Pree’s funeral pyre.

It definitely smelt like snow was on the way, Ferret decided, walking the league from where she had left a silent dragon to where the pilgrims were camped by the lake. Her knowledge of the history of the old war was good. She had met some of those who had fought here when she was young; Heinela knights who had joined with Pree and Farthing to finally destroy the Haften threat. She remembered from the stories that the Haften forces had camped in these same woods that were now being used by those who wished to see the lighting of the Beacon. It was a

peaceful scene. Small groups of ordinary looking people sat on bedrolls gathered around their fires, talking quietly. Some of the men smiled at her as she passed by, but the women were less forthcoming. At one fire sat two young men and a young woman, a little more relaxed than the others. None of them looked to be more than eighteen or nineteen years old.

"May I join you?" asked Ferret, politely.

"Are you here to see the beacon?" one of the young men asked.

"I am, but I don't know much about it. I'm from the West, and I am travelling through these lands."

"Many are like you and are here to learn," said the young man. "Please, join us." Ferret thanked him and laid down her bedroll in the space next to the young woman.

"Are you a follower of The True Path?" asked the woman.

"I'm not sure," answered Ferret. "I'm just curious, I think. There are more people here than I expected."

"We are new to it too," said the second young man. "Though Estern, my brother here, has been a convert much longer than I."

"And you?" Ferret asked the girl.

"This is my first time. I am from the same village as Estern and Brek. My name is Feilla." She smiled shyly.

"People call me Ferret. I'm from Gornenshire in the West."

"Are you a mother?" asked the girl, to Ferret's surprise.

"No, I'm not. Not yet,"

"Your destiny is to be one, girl," Estern assured her. Ferret just smiled; the only person she knew who could vaguely get away with calling her girl was Mab-Abin.

"I will be a mother soon, I believe," said Feilla confidently.

"You are young," commented Ferret.

Feilla frowned. "I am seventeen, Ferret. I should have been a mother several times by now if I had known the truth. But I will lay with many warriors tomorrow, and I will produce a Bern-Ged."

Ferret kept her counsel and nodded. If she remembered her old Adelan that would roughly work out as a Warrior of God. "And if you have a girl?" she asked.

"To be a Mordormae, a mother to a girl child, is not as worthy as to be a Mordorbern, but I will still give faith for the honour."

"It sounds very important to you, Feilla."

"It is important to the One, The Oeling. I am nothing but his vessel." The girl seemed blissfully happy about her ordeal on the next day. "It is my time, the moment of my cycle, and I am blessed that it should be on the day of Pree's rebirth!" She smiled sweetly, and the two young men looked at her hungrily. Ferret had a good idea who would be first in line in the morning. "Is it your time?" asked the girl.

"If I understand you, then no it isn't. Not for a couple of weeks," Ferret lied to her. Her cycle was as unpredictable as it was unfaithful which probably had something to do with her dragoness, as she liked to call it. She had long ago realised why dragons bred so little; most of the time they just failed to fall pregnant. Something else that Sen-Liana had got wrong.

"That is sad," said Brek. "We would have been most honoured to have lain with you and suffered."

"Suffered?" She might be five hundred years old, but Ferret still thought she was a reasonable catch.

“We must suffer for the joy it brings us. It demeans us in the eyes of The Oeling and we will have to carry that with us.”

Ferret’s brain was working overtime. There were so many bits of different old beliefs going on here. New words created out of old Adelan, references to giving faith which was from the Church of the True, and then The Oeling, which was an old single-god belief that predated just about everything.

“Can I ask what will happen tomorrow?” she asked Estern, who seemed to know more than the others.

“During the day, the mothers who are in Adfyren will stay here in the woods, and the young of us will lie with them. The other mothers, like you, and those men who are older or sickened, will gather before the ruins of the stronghold, and listen to the priests. Then, in the afternoon, those mothers here will be paraded so they may all be worshipped, which is their right. We will then climb the mountain and wait for the lighting of Pree’s Beacon of Hope.”

It was quite simply mind-numbing. An adfyr, in the old language, meant a sacrificial fire. Ferret realised that they were corrupting this to describe the women being in heat like dogs.

“Feilla, have you done this before?”

“No, Ferret. I was ignorant of my real worth; I have yet to lie with a man.”

For the next hour, the four spoke together, and Ferret learned some more of this confused and twisted religion. To them, Pree was the symbol of betrayal and motherhood. They believed she would have been the mother of many warriors. The story of her and the war had been twisted beyond recognition. Although the Haftens were still the foe, the dragons were now the traitors, abandoning Pree to her death and the Pharsil-Hin to their fate in Bind.

“The Oeling sent the disease down on the dragons to punish them for their treachery,” Estern explained. “They were sucked into the dirt and returned to hell. We must recruit many warriors and mothers so should the dragons rise again from the dirt, we will defeat them. Though we are few at the moment, the many of us here will spread the word in fives, and the mothers will have children, each seeded from the many.”

“Fives?”

“Five is the number of the true companions; The Cwen, The Warrior, The Sister, The Traveller and the Old One. All are governed by five. When the dragons betrayed Pree, the five were separated, and the Old One was killed by a vengeful dragon,” said Estern. Ferret kept her mouth clamped shut. It did not take a genius to work out that the old one was Eafa, her father. “Each of our God Kingdoms will be run by Fin-Bregen, five leaders who bring us the Word of the True and to whom we are wholly subservient. And in turn, they are ruled by the Fin-Bregen-Ged who lead all!” His eyes glowed with wonder.

Five God-Kings. This was a step up from prelates. Now the leaders of this new corruption were calling themselves gods. The night was becoming icier, and Feilla shivered.

“You are cold, Feilla,” said Ferret.

“Can I stay close and warm?” asked the girl, sounding young and small. “Bern-Ged must only hold a mother during mating.”

“You stay as close as you like,” said Ferret and moved her bedroll next to the girl. The young men wrapped themselves in their own bedding and soon the murmurs of the camp faded, the hundreds gathered falling asleep in the night’s chill. As she lay quietly, her heart went out to all the young women and to Mab-Abin. He was going to be horrified how the memory of his rider was being twisted and misused, and even more by what these young people were facing. Draig yr Anialr, more than any other dragon, coped with injustice poorly.

When morning dawned, Ferret was already awake. She could go without sleep for days if she needed, and she had stayed awake thinking through what she had learned. And she was angry at herself. This might not be a continent-wide religion, but it was organised, and there were hundreds of people here. That she had never heard of it until she and Mab-Abin had travelled across Preland said so much about how she had lived her life. Yes, she had used her skill for healing, but others were healers too. She felt she had squandered what she had inherited from her father who had died to help protect an ideal and defeat a cruel enemy. A drift of snow blew across the camp, and Feilla and the two young men stirred. The three said nothing but walked into the woods by the road, disappearing into the trees. Ferret watched while more and more made their way quietly into the woods until half the camp had emptied. The camp was still and strangely peaceful, but she heard a few cries of anguish and pain from the trees. Ferret packed her things and set off for the ruins of Heldon Burh, feeling shame that she could do nothing about what might be happening.

In contrast, the atmosphere at the ruins of the ancient Haften stronghold, first sacked more than fifteen hundred years before and then destroyed by Pree's Army, was almost normal. Groups of five priests in robes chanted what sounded very much like the writings of Orin Helting, the obscure zealot who had preached that humans were the true natives of Dirt and the hexapod species were the invaders. He hadn't been against them, as such, but just believed they came here second. Now, his original, highly conservative writings, the Gielefa Sinde and Gielefa Geth, had been usurped once more and corrupted with lies and strange mythologies that had grown up over the five hundred years since Pree had died in this very place. Ferret found it all disquieting. She had never known Pree, but some of the knights who had been here had spoken of Pree's death and the agony of the tall, nomadic warriors who had sworn to protect her. The Pharsil-Hin had returned here after the war and had built a new society. Were they behind this?

"You are not to be a mother this day, child?"

Ferret turned to face a small, smiling, older woman. "It is not the right time for me, I'm afraid."

"I am sorry, that is very sad, but we will celebrate those who are giving themselves to The Oeling and the beautiful memory of Pree."

"I am learning still," said Ferret, trying to sound as young as the woman thought she was. "I learned some last night, but there is so much I am ignorant of. Have you followed for a while?"

"Many years, child, from a time when there were few of us, though I never was the mother I should have been. I gave birth to seven Bern-Ged and six Mae, but not all survived and after my last, I could have no more. I have to live with that shame and none of the men will now speak to me."

"That is sad, mother," said Ferret, putting her hand on the woman's arm.

"No child, it is right they should not. I must live my years in shame and prayer so others might shine. I did not have my first till I was twenty, but some beautiful Mae here are much younger; they have more years ahead of them and will give so much more than I ever could."

"What of the Bern-Ged, the warriors?"

"All men are warriors, child, as all women become mothers. But some warriors are charged to be the elite. The Sten-Ged, they are called." That would be archers of god, Ferret supposed, thinking through the ancient words. The woman pointed up to the mountain above. "You will

see them when they line the path to the beacon tonight. They are mighty warriors and they will lead us against the dragons when they arise from the dirt.”

“Arise?”

“Child, you know little!” The older woman laughed gently. “Dragons are not born but are spewed out from the dirt, from hell. They then rise to corrupt the sky. That is why they have to fly so hard because unlike the free birds, the sky rejects them.”

“Mother, what am I meant to do this day? I did not know what to expect, and I’m a bit lost.”

“Then you shall stay with me. We will talk a little, and we will sit for many hours and let the words of The Oeling flood over us.”

And the cold, thought Ferret, for it was snowing heavier now and many were shivering and pulling their coats around them. The Ancient closed her eyes for a moment to blank out the scene and felt little tugs around her, small inconsistencies within the mist of rock and humans. She frowned and concentrated, sweeping away the normal to leave these tiny oddities. It was the priests! Ferret opened her eyes again and thought of some of the odd notes in her grandmother’s book. Her grandfather Dierren had discovered he could sense magicians though they could not sense him. These priests were magicians, of sorts. There was no great skill here, they were feeble, and they might not even realise what they were, but it was there. Yet another puzzle amidst the torment that Ferret could not solve.

By the time the sun began to set, the snow lay thickly on the ground. The priests ceased their endless readings and withdrew and the people in the gorge before the ruins gathered.

“They will present the new mothers now,” explained the old woman. Ferret realised she had never asked her name, but something inside made her almost fear to put a name to anyone gladly accepting this abomination. “Hush now, we wait in silence, and each will present themselves.”

Just over a hundred women and young girls filed slowly up the path that had been cut through the old stones up to the ruins. As each reached the broken fortifications where the priests stood, they declared how many men they had lain with. They all looked ragged and dirty, and some could barely stand.

“I am with Pree!” each declared to show they had lain with many warriors to conceive. Some were in their forties, many in their twenties, but most in their teens. Lastly, Feilla staggered up the ramp. She wore nothing but a long shirt and was filthy and bloody. Ferret gasped at the sight, then held herself in check when the old woman glanced at her. The young woman reached the top of the ramp supported by two others, and she turned and faced the waiting pilgrims.

“I am with Pree,” she said, and then shouted it out. “I am with Pree!” A rapturous gasp of wonder flowed through the crowd as the girl collapsed. Ferret turned to the old woman who had her hands together, tears of euphoria running down her face. Two of the women brought Feilla back down the ramp and carried her to the camp. Ferret did not even bother to thank the old lady for her help, but slipped away back to the camp quickly and silently. It was a trick of her father’s, and no one noticed her leave or where she had gone.

“Feilla, look at me!” The girl had been placed by her bedroll and then abandoned, the others returning to the mountain.

“Ferret?” muttered the girl.

“Yes, it’s me. You are bleeding; you are bleeding too much.”

“I am? Is that not good?”

“It means you have been hurt; your insides are damaged.” Ferret placed her hands on the girl’s stomach and closed her eyes for a moment. She had no idea what had happened in the woods, but this damage spoke of far more than a moment of passion. She had been roughly abused, and she was torn and injured. “Feilla, can you hear me?”

“I am so tired, Ferret, and I hurt. What is wrong with me? Have I shamed The Oeling?”

“You have shamed no one, girl, but I need to help you, and this might cause you some pain.” Actually, it was going to hurt a lot, but with any luck, the girl would lose consciousness quickly. Ferret glanced around; the camp was abandoned. “Just hold my arm, girl.” Ferret put her hands on the girl’s abdomen, then closed her eyes and concentrated. She slowly moved her mind into the girl’s body, first into her stomach, and then into her womb. It was bruised and ruptured, and Ferret did not want to guess how. Slowly and painfully she started repairing the wounds, stopping the bleeding. The girl gasped in pain then screamed once and fell silent as she passed out. Ferret ignored her; she had to concentrate. She worked her way down from the womb, soothing and healing, stopping more of the bleeding. The girl was lucky to be alive. Then she worked on the most difficult injury, and the damage here was much worse. It took Ferret nearly an hour to stop all the bleeding. Then, close to the point of collapse, she moved into the girl’s bloodstream and gave the limp body energy and strength to replace the blood it had lost.

Exhausted, Ferret pulled out from the girl, washed her face with water, then wrapped Feilla up warmly in her bedding and that of the young men’s. Using some wood, she erected a shelter for the girl, then built up the fire, letting the heat flow under the makeshift shelter. She knew the young men would be climbing up to the beacon now and would be back soon. The girl would be weak for some considerable time, but she would live, she hoped. Feilla would not have a child from this ordeal, and Ferret knew the girl would never now be able to fall pregnant; the young men, the so-called warriors, had nearly killed her. The five-hundred-year-old Ancient stood painfully, picked up her bag and set off north. She had no wish to see the lighting of the beacon.

Mab-Abin flew high in the night sky over Heldon Heights as he had known it, renamed in a moment of pain and foolishness, perhaps, to The Beacon of Hope by the grieving Johnson Farthing. No one would see him from the ground, it was too dark, but with his eagle-keen eyes, he could make out every detail. The steep peak was covered with followers holding torches, and along the path stood warriors, dressed like the Pharsil-Hin of old, all carrying longbows. Though they looked the part and were strong and stood proudly, these were not the nomads he remembered. They did not have the same height, or the long, beautiful faces, and their longbows were those of an ordinary human archer. He could see hints of their ancestry in their darker skin and their posture, but it was clear the uniqueness of the nomads of his day had now gone.

Five men in robes walked slowly up the path between the Sten-Ged. Each wore a single band of metal around his head, and each carried a single item. The first carried a bow. The second an arrow. The third carried a sword. The fourth held the simple printed cloths that Pree had loved. Finally, the last carried a long lock of red hair. The offerings were placed on the beacon, then each of the five God-Kings, the Fin-Bregen-Ged, stood back and took a burning torch. In unison, they shouted to skies and the gathered crowd.

“To the Warrior Mother, who but for the betrayal of the Draig would have birthed a nation of Bern-Ged. To her we pray for power and retribution on this night when her blessed spirit rose from the ashes left abandoned long after the burning of her pyre, to be gathered in the arms of The Oeling.”

Then slowly, in a vile imitation of the moment of grief half a millennium before, the crowd began to chant. “Pree, Pree, Pree, Pree.” And again. “Pree, Pree, Pree, Pree.” Again and again, growing louder and louder as the Fin-Bregen-Ged put their torches to the beacon and the flames reached high into the night. “Pree, Pree, Pree, Pree. Pree, Pree, Pree, Pree.”

And far above, out of the sight of those enraptured on the mountain below, a lone dragon howled across Dirt in pain and grief for the rider he had loved.

Mab-Abin found Eiferra sitting quietly in the snow in the middle of the glade in the early morning. She had sat there all night and was frozen through. The dragon nearly collapsed when he landed and he rested his head next to her in silence. She reached out and put her arm over his nose and kissed his cheek.

“I heard you last night,” she said. “Where did you go? I felt you leave, and I wasn’t sure if you would return.”

“I flew to Hoar North. I needed to go somewhere she had never been, to a place where humans never go.”

“I understand, beloved,” said Ferret. “But you came back.”

“I need you.”

“I need you too. But I am fearful.”

“Why?” asked Mab-Abin quietly.

“Because of the abomination here. The dragons may not want to come back. I’m not certain I want to stay.”

Mab-Abin stood, put his hand out and raised Ferret to her feet. “Come, my dearest friend. Let’s go home.”

Ferret climbed upon the dragon’s back, and they flew away above the snow clouds, across the Western Alps to their olive trees. There they stood together, the surf washing over their feet, and gazing west across the vast Missing Sea towards the peace of Angyn.

“I think I have worked out all these rubbings I did.”

“Neat trick that, though how you are going to explain all the missing black wax to the girls I don't know.”

“They love my little visits to the Abbey!”

“What, see you again in fifty years?”

“I think it is going to be more frequent now, you know.”

“Why?”

“This agrees with some of your memories about the Cwendrina predating the Heinela Cwendrin. I mean, the first time around. This is obscure, but it’s like she is linking everyone, not just a few dukes, but everyone everywhere, including dragons and callistons. Anything more you can tell me?”

“You don't have all my memories in your head, unfortunately.”

“Yes, I noticed it gets blurry the closer to your birth I get. Too much beer, I reckon. We need to go back down those tunnels. I think there is more there. Must be another blocked off passage somewhere.”

“Why so big? You have opened up five levels beneath the Abbey now.”

“Well, if I’m right, this goes back maybe ten thousand years. That is a lot of stone carvings; you need lots of wall!”

Chapter 7 – A King

When Ferret returned, Terran was waiting for her.

“Terran, you look awful! What are you doing here?”

Mab-Abin had dropped her off in the early morning a league or so away, and she had walked back to her cottage to clear her head from the last few days. The two of them had spent three days at the villa talking over what she had found out about the new church of The True Path. They had concluded that whatever terrible thing was happening at the Beacon of Hope, for the moment, at least, it was not something they could deal with. It had left them feeling hopeless and depressed, but knowing that they must continue with what they knew and understood. That meant returning to Kend and not staying hidden in their little sanctuary by the Missing Sea.

“I’m sorry but I’ve been here for two days, Ferret.”

“Outside? You idiot knight. Get inside at once.” Ferret more or less pushed the tall man into her small cottage. “Why are you waiting and why not just wait in here and light the fire? Sit down!”

“I can’t, I’m sorry. Ferret, the King’s son has been injured.”

“Oh, no. How bad? Oh, stupid question; you wouldn’t be here if it was nothing.”

“He fell off his horse, and we thought he was alright, just a bit bruised, but he collapsed later in the day and has been very ill and coughing up blood.”

“Oh, dear.” Ferret turned the knight around to face the door. “Stay there, I just need to change.” She wasn’t wearing her leathers, but it had been raining, and she was wet and grubby after her walk through the woods. “When did you last hear anything?”

“About an hour ago. One of the servants rode up to say there was no change, but the boy is mumbling.”

“A fever?”

“I don’t know.”

“Sounds more complicated. Right, clean enough. Come on!” Ferret pushed the knight outside and yelled for her horse who she had let do her own thing for the last few days. As the knight mounted up, a happy mare trotted out from the trees covered with twigs and bits of undergrowth. “Look at the state of you, Merry!” Ferret brushed the worst from the horse’s back and leapt up.

“No saddle?” asked the knight.

“No time. Go!” The knight spurred his big Colny into action and Merry cantered after him with a snort and a whinny. “Yeah, yeah, you can tell me about it later,” said Ferret, holding lightly onto the base of the horse’s mane and giving her a nudge with her legs.

Ferret’s cottage was in a small glade half a league from the main road to Weidess Burh at Cullin Falls, and then it was another half league up the riverside road to the castle itself. They trotted out from the rough track onto the wider road, and the knight pushed his big grey, dappled

stallion into a gallop, Ferret and Merry close behind. Weidess Burh had been a favourite of many of those friends from that long terrible war of centuries past. It was where they first fought the Haftens, and yet was also where they often found the most peace. And it was where Ferret's mother Elena had become friends with Eafa. Ferret did not believe in omens, good or bad, but she hoped perhaps that this special old castle may once again be a home of peace in this troubled world of Dirt.

"Take my horse, lad!" Sir Terran shouted to a boy as he rode up to the main gate. "And the healer's."

"Leave my horse," said Ferret. "She will only bite you. Go on, Merry. Go play!" She patted the horse on the behind and sent her off to the open ground behind the castle.

The boy watched the saddleless, bridleless horse trot off with confusion. "Will she be alright?"

"She'll be fine. Where is he, Sir Terran?" Ferret had only ever been to the castle once before and didn't know her way around at all.

"I will take you up there. Do you need anything?"

"Let me see him first."

Since the time Elena had stayed here, the castle had been rebuilt, and the only two recognisable features were the great hall, which had a new back wall, and the kitchen. Mab-Abin had told her that Mistry had had a secret bedroom up in the old tower, and Ferret looked up to see if she could work out where it was as they ran through the gate, up the main steps, and into the entrance hall.

"This is the healer," barked the knight at one of the servants. "I am taking her straight up. Is the King in with his son?"

"He's eating breakfast, Sir Knight."

"Go and fetch him, please."

"Yes, sir." The man ran off while Terran took Ferret up the broad stairs from the hall, across the balcony, and into a suite of rooms. Weidess Burh was a small functional keep, and King Hornan was not an ostentatious ruler. The castle had not been restored with the palatial rooms of some other kings' castles and neither were the rooms enriched by pointless decoration. The prince's room had a large, but simple bed, a desk, several chests, and a large wardrobe, but little else. Ferret pushed past the two hovering servants, walked straight to the bed, and looked into the boy's eyes.

"He's unconscious. Damn! I should have been here earlier."

"You can't read the future," said the knight quietly.

"Perhaps I should learn to. What is his name?"

"The prince?"

"Yes, the prince; what is his name?"

"Prince Evan," said a big man, entering the room at a pace.

"Evan, can you hear me?" Ferret asked the boy.

"I think it should be your highness," prompted Terran.

"I am trying to heal him, not make him feel good, Terran. Evan, can you hear me at all?"

There was no response and Ferret sat down on the bed.

"Well?" asked the big man.

"Are you his father?" asked Ferret, looking up.

"Yes, I am."

"Your son is very ill, I'm afraid."

“Can you help him, healer?”

“My name is Ferret. I can try to help him, but I can guarantee nothing.”

“He is the King,” Terran hinted to the woman.

“Terran, at this moment, I doubt he cares; it is the price of parenthood! Now, I guess that he has damaged his insides which will be why you did not see anything originally. That makes it not only complicated to deal with but possibly dangerous.”

“What do you mean?” The king indeed sounded more like a worried parent than a ruler.

“If I do not do something, he is going to get a lot worse. How much worse I don’t yet know. But if what is wrong with him is as bad as I fear, then my healing him might also cause him harm.”

“It might kill him?”

“No, he will only die if it is beyond me to heal. But if I save him, it might leave him still damaged for the rest of his life. Do you understand?”

The king looked over to his chief knight and to the two senior servants. Terran had told her previously that this man was thoughtful but very decisive. Now he looked confused and uncertain. “What do you need to do?”

“First, I must check him more closely. Then I must try to heal him.” Ferret looked around the room. “I’m not good at audiences. Please,” she said to the knight and the servants. “Only the father, I think.”

The king beckoned them away. “Sir Terran swears by you, healer. Tell me, honestly; can you save my son?”

“I generally make it a policy to be honest with everyone who comes to my cottage, king or peasant. I will say what I say to the others. Don’t confuse what I do with some idea of magic. If that really existed, there would be no death in this world. That there is tells you I can only try my best.” She turned back to the boy. “Now, Evan, let me have a closer look at you.”

Ferret pulled the sheets off the boy and put her hands on his chest which was heavily bruised on one side. He looked about ten years old and showed no signs of turning into a young man yet. The boy stirred involuntarily beneath her touch as she felt her way through her fingers and into his body. Some of what she found didn’t surprise her. The lad had a broken rib which would heal well enough even without her skills, but when she moved through his lungs, his liver, stomach and spleen, she found much more bleeding and several injuries that needed dealing with quickly. Her main worry was infection which was always so very hard to combat, even for her. For the moment, she thought the boy was free of any such complications, but he would need to be cared for. The injuries would take a tremendous amount of healing. The damage was far worse than the girl’s injuries had been at the Beacon of Hope, and Ferret knew she was going to find this painful. She pulled out from the boy to find the King’s hand on her shoulder.

“Are you alright, healer?” he asked, looking worried. “I thought you were going to faint.”

“Thank you. It takes a lot out of me.”

“Can you help him?”

“Yes, I think I can. He is very badly hurt inside his chest and stomach, and I must see to those injuries immediately to stop the bleeding. I cannot see any infection, but that does not mean it’s not there or won’t appear at some point. Have you your own healers?”

“My manservant is good with herbs if that is what you mean.”

“Good. Ask him to watch the boy for the next few days after I try to heal him.”

“Won’t you watch him?”

“Honestly? I probably won’t be able to.”

The king's eyes betrayed both his worry and his confusion, and Ferret knew he was putting his faith in her or, perhaps, Sir Terran. It said a lot for the man that he would trust her with the life of his son.

"If you fancy stopping me hitting the stone floor when I finish, I would be grateful!" Ferret smiled at the king, put her hands back on the boy, closed her eyes, and began her painful work.

"Someone help me?" shouted out the king an hour later as Ferret fell backwards off the bed unconscious, landing in his arms.

"You know, you have yet to call me Your Majesty."

Ferret opened one eye carefully to find herself in a very large bed, the cold winter sun shining through the leaded window and into her face. She blinked and put up a hand to shield her eyes.

"It's a family trait; we are not very interested in titles, just with intent." She closed her eyes again; her head was hurting. "How long was I out?"

"Three days, healer."

"Please, my name is Ferret, not healer; that also is just a title."

"At the moment, you could ask me to call you anything, to be honest, since you are so fond of honesty."

Ferret opened her eyes again with a little more success. The king was sitting on the end of the bed. He was smiling but looked desperately tired. Ferret sat up with a groan and the king leapt off the bed and turned around. She looked down. "Oh, someone seems to have undressed me." She pulled up the sheet quickly. "Sorry, you can turn back now. How is Evan?"

"Bruised and feeling terrible, but he's conscious. He had a fever for a couple of days, and my man has been looking after him. It has passed now."

"That is good. I will check on him shortly. I think I found everything, but I need to make sure. Where am I?"

"In my chamber; it was the nearest bed."

"Oh, do forgive me." Ferret smiled then looked at the king sideways. "You are living up to your reputation, you know."

"I have one?"

"Yes. As a thoughtful man. I'm pleased."

The King looked puzzled. "I don't suppose there is any chance you are going to call me Your Majesty, Sire or even King?"

"Not really. Like with me, it is your job, not who you are. Now I should get up, so unless you wish to demonstrate that even kings can blush, can I have my room, I mean your room, to myself?"

Prince Evan was sitting up in bed drinking a thin soup when Ferret walked into his room unannounced. The boy looked up in surprise.

"Don't worry boy, I'm just the healer who was helping you. My name is Ferret."

"Hello, healer," said the boy very quietly.

"Oh, just like your father. As I told him, healer is my job, Ferret is my name. Now, Evan, put down that soup and open your shirt, I need to look at you."

"I'm sorry?" The boy sounded nervous.

"Do it, Evan!" The King walked into the room grinning. "She doesn't seem very good with the idea of kings and princes, but then, she has also just saved your life."

“But?”

“Yes, and she is young and pretty; I had noticed too. Now, get your shirt off, my son.”

The boy handed his bowl of soup over to Ferret and shyly stripped off his nightshirt. Ferret waved to him to lean back against his pillows, put her hands on his chest and closed her eyes for a few seconds.

“The bruising is getting better,” she told him. “Your rib is healing nicely, and the injuries are going to be fine. You need to stay in bed for a few days and then be very careful for a month or preferably two. You can come to the cottage in a few weeks, and I will check you over again. You can also let me know if you feel ill at any point. I suspect the bright red colour on your face and neck, however, will only go when you put your shirt back on.” She handed the shirt to the boy and helped him slip it back over his head. “Now, finish your soup and rest.” Ferret stood up and tried to push a headache away.

“Healer?” asked the boy. “Ferret?”

“Yes, Evan?”

“Thank you.”

“I will see you again, but now I need something to eat. Actually, a lot of somethings to eat.” She walked cautiously out of the room followed by the king.

“You have my thanks, too,” he said as they stepped out onto the balcony overlooking the hall. “I can have food brought up to the great hall if you like, or to a room.”

Ferret turned and looked up at the king appraisingly. “This castle has a long and notable history; did you know that?”

“I know it was used in the ancient war against the Haftens.”

“It was. Pree and General Farthing used it for one of their bases, even though it was half ruined at the time.”

“My great, great-grandfather rebuilt it,” said King Hornan. “He was very fond of the Burh.”

“I once heard the story that Pree took all her meals in the kitchen, sitting at the table with her soldiers, officers and anyone else who was there eating. So, if it’s alright with you, I would like to go and stage a small invasion of your kitchen and see what they can make me. I think I can work out where it is.”

The king smiled in amusement and bowed slightly. “My kitchen is yours for as long as you wish, healer. Ferret.” He smiled again and returned to his son’s room. Ferret watched him go, thinking. She had noticed the hurriedly made up rough pallet on the floor in the boy’s room; she was certain it had not been there for the servants.

In five hundred years, the kitchen had probably changed a lot, Ferret suspected. But it did not take much imagination to work out how it once must have been with its large open hearth and the huge table with benches along either side. Now it had a central fire and several large work tables where five cooks were busy preparing the day’s meals for the castle. It still had a good-sized table with benches, and Ferret sat down with her back against the wall to eat a plate of sliced meat and fruit, and drink a terracotta mug of mild ale.

“You have made a fan of one young boy, my friend,” said Terran, sitting opposite her at the table, to the consternation of the cooks. “First time I have been down here without a list of orders from the king.”

“Kitchens are the heart of a home. Even a big home like this,” said Ferret between mouthfuls.

“I will remember that. Are you alright?”

“Tired, but yes, I’m fine.”

"I know healing can take it out of you, but I didn't realise it could be so bad." The knight had a worried look on his face.

"It just wears me out, Terran, and I've had a bad few days. I probably wasn't my usual bouncy self."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"No, not really. It is not so important at the moment. I was a bit surprised to find I was still here with Hornan checking on me."

"Not as surprised as I was to come running up the stairs to find him standing in the middle of the landing with you in his arms. He looked like he was carrying a deadly snake!"

"I am not that bad!" said Ferret in mock annoyance.

"To be fair, he has had an eventful and stressful few days. His son fell off his horse, then became ill, then his own servants could do nothing, then you were not around, and then he finds this beautiful young woman refusing to call him king passing out in his arms. It was all a bit much. I have never seen him look more like he wanted to run away and hunt boar or something." The knight chuckled, but Ferret noticed he also had rings under his eyes.

"You haven't slept much, have you, Terran?"

"No, no one has. How bad was he?"

"Is he. I nearly couldn't heal him. I don't think the injury would have had to have been much worse and I would have failed. That must have been one hell of a fall from the horse. Ten-year-olds normally bounce quite well."

"The horse bolted, and he was thrown into a fence. It's a gift from the king, too."

"Oh dear!"

"Talking of which, your horse moved herself into the king's stables and pushed his own horse out. She is refusing to budge."

Ferret choked on her ale. "Well, considering I have just spent the last three days in the Kings bed, it seems fair enough." She was suddenly aware the kitchen had fallen silent. "Well, erm, he wasn't in it!" She looked in panic at her friend the knight who just sat there grinning. "Probably about time I went back to the cottage, then," she said. "And took my horse with me. Sorry."

Three weeks later and the snow reached Kend. It was not a heavy fall and the sky cleared quickly, but Ferret found herself dreaming of the far south of Preland as she split more logs for her fire, her breath puffing out like smoke each time she swung her axe. She had a fondness for South Ham which was as far south as you could get on Preland, and she had a cottage in a small, unpopulated cove which she had used from time to time over the last five hundred years. Thinking about it, she had yet to take Mab-Abin there so perhaps a trip might be in the offing.

"I suppose that will depend on what these visitors want," she told the innocent lump of wood on her block before she split it clean in two.

"I always said you are more dangerous than you look," called out Sir Terran from the driver's seat of a small cart, a smiling Evan sitting next to him. "Not quite up to riding yet," he explained. "Long time since I have driven one of these, I have to say!"

Ferret leant the axe against the block and walked over to the cart, dusting off her hands.

"A lovely surprise!" she said to the grinning boy, who blushed before he could stop himself. "It's about time I checked you out, though you look reasonable."

"I feel good!"

"But you are bored?"

“How did you know?” The boy looked confused as if she had just read his mind.

“You feel fine, you look fine, you were not due to come and be checked over quite this soon, and yet you are here? Sounds like you wanted to get out of the castle and this was as much as your father would allow.”

“I think she is an old witch, your Highness,” teased Sir Terran. The boy looked at the knight suspiciously.

“Come on, Evan. I have a fire burning in the cottage, and I will just look at you briefly. You can bring your annoying knight with you unless you want to be all alone with the evil old witch.” The evil witch helped the boy down, who was obviously still very sore and weak. As they walked into the small, welcoming cottage, he slipped his hand into hers. Terran followed, smiling and shaking his head.

Ferret’s cottage was a little bigger than many. It had belonged to a woodsman at some point who had had a large family. It had grown over the years and there were two tiny rooms in the attic, a bedroom off the main room of the house, and two outhouses. The farmer who owned it was all too pleased to rent it to someone since the well needed repairing, the clearing was overgrown, and no one else wanted it. It had taken her and a rather large dragon just a couple of weeks to sort it out and get it back up to scratch, and all for a cheap rent. The main room of the house was big enough to accommodate a small square table and chairs, two other comfier chairs by a fire, chests under the shuttered windows and a smaller kitchen table next to a stone cooking hearth. Ferret told the young lad to sit up on the kitchen table while she washed her hands.

“So, Terran, why were you coming to see me in the first place before you discovered you had company?”

“An invitation from the King, Miss Ferret,” he replied. “He would like to thank you by offering you dinner next week.”

“That is not necessary, Terran.” Ferret dried her hands and told the boy to remove his shirt; he blushed slightly less this time.

“Tell that to the Prince here; the invitation was his idea, though I think the king would also like to see you.”

“Really, Evan?”

“Yes, Ferret. I asked my father if we could invite you to a feast so we could say thank you.” The boy smiled and then blushed again when the Ancient put her hands on his chest, stomach and back, closing her eyes so she could concentrate.

“Well, I am not sure I am very good at sitting at a table eating a royal feast with nobility, Evan. I like things simple, as you can see by my home.”

Evan looked disappointed, and Ferret told herself off quietly. “Sir Terran said you might be funny about it.”

“He used those words?” Ferret looked at the knight, who turned away quickly. “Well, alright, I will come, but on a condition.”

“What is that?”

Ferret leant forward and whispered into the boy’s ear for a few seconds. He looked up and grinned.

“I like that! I’m not sure what my father will say.”

“Well, this is your idea, so you make the rules, young man,” said Ferret, and planted a kiss on his head. “Now, I have work to do, and you have been out long enough. No arguments!”

The boy looked disappointed again.

"I know, Ferret. I keep thinking I am all well again when I wake up and then by midday I feel terrible.

"You were very badly hurt, Evan. You will be alright, but it is going to take time. Now, go on with you!" The boy slipped off the table and walked back out to the cart.

"Well?" asked Terran.

"It is slow, and he looks better than he really is, but he is healing. Tell the king to watch him over winter. He is weak, and he will be prone to sickness. Come spring, he should then get him busy and build his strength up again, but this is going to take a long time."

"I'll tell him. So, what is your little scheme?"

"Oh, that is between Evan and me, nosy knight. Now, I need to help someone else, but I'll be back in six days, so have dinner hot and ready!"

"I will pass your instructions on to the king, dear lady," replied the knight with an exaggerated bow.

"Get out, Terran!"

Ferret waited until the cart was safely on its way back to the Burh, then walked up through the woods to the other house that she and Mab-Abin had hidden on the side of hill. She could understand the need for secrecy when they were in Kend, but she missed the openness of the villa. Over the years, most of the farms around hers in Gornenshire had been abandoned, and for the moment there was no one to see the odd desert dragon on the beach. When they were there, there was none of this hiding and mystery. But then, that is what they were doing; bringing back the dragons so no one had to hide.

"Knock, knock."

"I could hear you coming all the way up, shorty."

"Such a polite dragon. Fancy a trip?"

"What have you in mind?"

"Paddling in the south." Ferret wandered into the canvas-covered dragon house and sat on one of the rugs her friend had liberated from somewhere.

"Any particular reason?" Mab-Abin's house was not exactly huge, about the right size for one desert dragon as long as said dragon did not turn around too quickly, but it was windproof, rainproof and had a large fire, and that did for him most of the time. "Pass that leather lace over."

"Have you trimmed your claws?" Ferret handed over the bundle of laces which the dragon was using to finish off his new hides.

"I can't do this work with them long, and to be honest, I do not see me going into battle any time soon. Talking of which, you and I are both slacking on our training."

"I'm good with the longbow, dear one."

"You are brilliant with it, but you won't stay like it without practice, and your sword work is mediocre."

"Well, let me wallop two overfed dragons with one big rock, then. I am invited to dinner at the Burh with the king in six days to thank me for healing the prince. But I suspect the king might want to talk about other matters. I have been getting hints from Terran over the last month that the king is looking for opinions about the state of his kingdom and its people, and I think the knight has dropped my name into the conversations a few times."

"So?"

“So, if that is the case, then I can see me and you being nailed down for the winter. I need to warm my toes first, so I propose a flight down to South Ham to see if my cottage is still standing, and we can train on the beach. It is never anything but summer or spring down there.”

“I’m game. Can you give me an hour?”

“Make it three. I need to get a message to the cook at the castle and then I will take Merry down to Cattan’s farm so she can use his stables. I will meet you back up here.”

The far south of Preland should, in theory, have been the most populous region of the continent. It was reasonably fertile, had by far the best weather, and the least challenging terrain. But the truth of it was that it was probably the poorest region. With the major ports to be found halfway up the east coast on the Yonder Sea, most trading routes had traditionally serviced the more northerly countries either side of the red mountains and neglected the south. The region also had few natural resources, no coal or iron, and only one navigable river. One way or another, it had suffered for centuries.

“I have been checking some of the notes in Sen-Liana’s book,” said Ferret, stripping off her leathers and flopping down on her small, private beach. “Back in my grandfather’s day, there were several dragon communities around here, mostly sea dragons, but some of your lot too.”

“Sort of place we like; warm, dry, good hunting. Alright, so Ponack struggled with the warm bit, but we are a simple people, you know, with few needs.” Mab-Abin unbuckled his hides, folded them, and put them on the rocks near the small cottage.

“Apart from the whole goat in one sitting.”

“There is that, yes. So, what did you think of the new hides?”

“Very soft, dear. Now, I am going to just lie here for half an hour and enjoy the sun and then kick the door in. It always gets stuck when I’m away.”

“How long since you’ve been here?”

“Five years, maybe six. But I was here for four years last time.”

“I don’t understand why you went to so much trouble to hide your age. Weasel only did when he thought it would complicate things. The rest of the time he didn’t care.”

“I don’t think I have a logical answer for that, except there are a few things I know that he possibly didn’t. To start with, magicians, even decent healers, are almost unknown in the west, so I didn’t want to stand out. Also, nearly every person who claims to be a magician is just a con artist, except some of the healers.”

“Actually, Eafa always said that. He complained he was unpopular everywhere.”

“Well, that bit is true, and those with talent have few friends though the healers fare better. And this thing about multiple talents and great magicians? Complete rubbish.”

“You mean they don’t exist?”

“No, I mean that they are nothing special. In fact, I think it’s common that someone with genuine talent can learn to do more than one thing.” Ferret sat up, took off her shirt and lay on her face in the warm sand, the sun gently kissing her back. “Basically, I think just about everything everyone has said is probably wrong. They have made it all sound mystical and twisted and somehow...”

“Magical?”

“Yes, that’s the word.”

“And you?” asked Mab-Abin.

“I am still trying to puzzle out me. I know Sen-Liana thought she put together everything useful about Weasel and me, but I believe she is wrong. She didn’t even get our name right.”

Ferret lay quietly waiting for Mab-Abin to say something, and when he said nothing, she looked up. "Are you alright?"

"Sorry, I was just thinking."

"About Pree?" The desert dragon had been keeping to himself more than usual in the last couple of weeks.

"No, about you."

"What about me?"

"You are my rider, but you are also an Ancient. I had never heard the term when I was young, but it means a lot to the dragons in Angyn. It's supposed to be my honour to carry you, and it is, but I don't want it to be."

"Why not?"

"I want it to be because you are my friend and my partner."

"Haven't I been?"

"Yes, you have. But it's not been complete, not as it should be. What I saw from the sky at the Beacon of Hope tore me apart inside, but when I flew to Hoar North and stood on the ice, I knew I could finally put Pree to rest. It sounds stupid because she was not capable of a long life, so even had she not been killed she would have died centuries ago. But it mattered, for some reason; to me anyway. Seeing where she died has helped, and I think I can now have her as the good memory she should have been, and not some sort of ghost. Look, I know we have already done this bit, but Eiferra, will you be my rider?"

Surprised by the open-hearted honesty of her beautiful friend, Ferret stood and faced the dragon. "If I am worthy, and not just because I am an Ancient."

"Yes, dear friend, you are worthy; for yourself you are."

"Then yes. I will be your rider."

The two stood in the sand in silence looking at each other and understanding that something meaningful and personal had just taken place. Then, with a whoop, Mab-Abin grabbed the woman up in his arms and ran into the sea.

When Ferret rode up to the castle and, for the sake of the nervous stable boy, put Merry into a stall and shut the door, she hoped that no one commented that her dark complexion had become a little darker in the last few days. Though she and Mab-Abin had played in the sand and sea, and neither hide nor leathers made it back out of the cottage, she had also put in several days of archery practice and sword work, and her arms were aching.

When she walked up the steps from the small inner ward to the keep, she was surprised to be met by the king.

"Healer," he said warmly, and then took her hand. "Ferret. You realise you are one of the more welcome visitors to this old place."

"You are very kind."

"Oh, still no formality?"

"Highly unlikely," she said with a smile as he led her up the stairs.

"You will notice I am not dressed in kingly finest. To be honest, I am not sure what that is, but I am under strict instructions from the prince to dress as if I were just going hunting or working around the castle. So, you have me as you see me."

"A good thing too since I own no finest either!" Ferret had once had a beautiful wardrobe supplied by Evana and Ythen, but those clothes had perished over the long years. "This is about as dressy as I get."

“Well, I have no idea what the prince is up to, but I have a feeling that at least part of this evening is probably your fault.”

“I apologise in advance. No, actually I don’t,” Ferret corrected herself. “This is your son’s night, not mine. All I did was suggest that he respect a bit of history.”

When they walked into the entrance hall, Prince Evan came down the stairs a little stiffly and gave Ferret a hug, then blushed. Ferret smiled but closed her eyes very briefly as she held him.

“I was worried you would not come,” said the young boy. “Terran said you were not at the cottage.”

“Have you had him checking up on me, young Evan?” Ferret raised a playful eyebrow.

“No!” replied Evan defensively. “He just said.”

“I know. He likes to make sure I’m alright. Now, where are we going and who else is here?”

“Everyone. I mean, everyone I know. Sir Terran, Beven is there, and Chelly and Mrs Daine and ...”

“Evan, I don’t know who these people are!”

“Erm, I do,” said the king, looking bemused. “Not the usual list, however.”

“Beven is my father’s manservant, and he helped me after you healed me. Chelly is the maid that looked after me when I was younger and still a bit now. Mrs Daine is the chief cook, and then there is Garron, who is the best bowman in the kingdom, and Havvin, who is my uncle.”

“Great-uncle; he is my uncle,” pointed out the king. “And where exactly are all these people, young prince?” The king looked puzzled but amused.

“Where they should be, sir,” answered his son formally. “In the place where everyone is equal and none is more important than anyone else.”

“And where is that?”

“In the kitchen, of course! Come on!” The young boy disappeared down the stairs to the kitchen leaving his father standing there looking awkward.

“You have been to your kitchen before haven’t you, Liander?” asked Ferret, looking up at him.

“Of course! It’s my kitchen.”

“And have you ever eaten in there or done any cooking?”

“Well, no.”

“Then, Liander, I think it’s about time you did. Take my arm!” Ferret put her arm out for the king, who took it and led her to the stairs.

“It’s Hornan, not Liander. If you are not going to call me your majesty, then I would prefer you called me Hornan. Sir Terran does when he shouts at me, so I suppose you can too.”

“Terran shouts at you?”

“We grew up together, and he was always bigger than me. Some habits never die.”

“And for that I am very grateful, Hornan.”

Five hundred years is a long time, and some traditions take a bit of kicking to get restarted. Thanks to Mab-Abin and his stories, and some memories of her mother, Ferret knew a lot about this kitchen. She knew that her mother had eaten here regularly, that her father used to sit with his feet on the table, trying to get drunk and forgetting to, and she knew that Pree used to do the cooking sometimes, simply because they never had a cook here at Weidess Burh or anywhere else. But she had to be careful with her knowledge and she did not want to have to explain how she knew what she did. To her relief, she was sitting between Sir Terran and the cook and not

placed with the King. If this evening was going to work, the man needed to relax on his own and not because she was sitting next to him forcing him to. Also, she rather liked sitting next to Sir Terran, and the cook knew where the beer was kept. With gentle hints, the beer kept flowing, the awkwardness of the evening ebbed away, and more meaningful talk took over without rank or favour getting in the way.

"If you will excuse me, I think I need to put someone to bed, sire," said Chelly, pointing at Evan, who had fallen asleep leaning against his father.

"I can take him, Chelly," said Hornan.

"No, sire, you stay here with your guests. I'm tired too, to be honest." The young woman did not look tired, but Ferret had noticed that she had had the most trouble eating with the king this evening. Of course, she was the youngest and some of the others here were older than the king and remembered him as a boy, which had helped.

"In which case, thank you, Chelly, and good night."

"Good night, sire." The girl did the smallest of curtsies from habit, gathered up the young boy in her arms and took him back upstairs. Hornan watched her go and then beckoned Ferret to move around and sit next to him.

"I saw you in the hall earlier. How is he? He seems weak to me."

"He is, Hornan. This is going to take a long time, you must realise that, and he may never be a strong man."

"Strength helps for a king."

"Strength can always be bought, Hornan. Wisdom and kindness are rarer commodities. Teach him and he will be fine, whether or not he is strong like his father."

"You sound like my mother. She was never one for swordplay."

"And was she right?"

"More often than my father ever admitted," he said, laughing. "You are a puzzle, young Ferret, if that is really your name."

"It is, or rather it's my childhood name which has sort of stuck. I like it. It keeps people guessing."

"Yes, it does. I look at you, and I see a beautiful young woman, smooth-faced, not a line on her, strong and full of youth. And then I talk to you, and I hear my mother, even my grandmother. The two do not fit well together."

"I have a young face, Hornan."

"And an evasive manner, girl!" For a moment, the king returned, but then he relaxed and smiled. "I suspect when it comes to such matters I am always going to lose with you. Though I also understand why my friend over there seems to find any excuse to go up to your little cottage. He says your living room is the warmest place in the world."

"He does? He has managed to forget to tell me that. Mostly he stands there looking like I am about to turn him into a toad!"

The king laughed out loud. "Forgive me, Terran, but I have just heard you perfectly described!" Hornan Liander gazed at the small group chatting around the table. It was a mix of people that he would never had thought to have put together. Aside from himself and those his son had listed, there was also one of the kingdom administrators, one of the men from the stables, one of the other knights, and the head of the castle guards. Also, unasked, the three kitchen girls who had served the simple peasant meal of beans, smoked bacon, and bread, had now sat down, and were flirting with the knight and the head of his archers.

"And?" Ferret asked him, guessing what he was thinking.

"I was wondering how close is this to what happened here in Pree's time?"

"My father was a historian, of sorts," said Ferret carefully. "I was brought up in the West and the knights from there joined with Pree to help defeat the Haftens. My father took great interest in the stories that were passed down through the old families. He told me that Pree loved this place and that not only did they eat in here, but she sometimes cooked."

"She was a great general; it seems odd."

"I think it was more than that. Farthing was the real general and yet he had simple beginnings in terrible poverty. Pree was the heart. People fought for Farthing because he represented the poor, but Pree brought them together because she gave them hope."

"You make it sound like a wonderful time in history."

"I'm sorry, Hornan, I didn't mean to. I think it was a truly terrible time."

"Is it better now? I know you have travelled. Terran told me you arrived here on a wagon having journeyed all over the south."

"It's hard for me to make that comparison because I was not alive when that war was fought. But if you are asking me whether it is better now than it was after those wars were over, then I would say no. I think it might be worse, and I fear if someone does not stand up like Pree did, what little that is good will die."

The king turned and looked at her straight in the eye. "You say that honestly?"

"On such matters I am always honest."

The king nodded, thoughtfully. "Terran, Garron, Uncle, can you spare me a moment?"

"Sir." The two soldiers moved up to the head of the table with Havvan, the king's uncle.

"I hadn't the chance to mention this earlier when you were all working, but I had a message today from one of my own people in Cisson Town. There is a small village near our border in the Red Mountains that has been suffering raids by bandits. They are asking for help. There is something about this that is bothering me."

"What?" asked Terran. Ferret noticed how in this relaxed company he quickly dropped the formality with his king.

"I'm not sure. The raids I think. I'm worried they are coming across from Hebbut beyond the mountains. I want to put together a mission to find out what is happening. I would like both of you there, and Ferret, if you are willing, I would like you to come as well. I am also going."

"Do you need to?" asked Terran.

"I think so. I haven't managed to make it to our northern region for more than six months, so I'm overdue a visit anyway. I would like to leave the day after tomorrow, and Havvan, can I leave you in charge here?"

"Of course, Hornan," replied the older man.

"I can put together the men we need tomorrow, sire," Garron told his king.

"Ferret?" asked the king. "I know this is short notice and you do not work for me, but I might need your healing abilities and perhaps your thoughts."

"I would like to come. It bothers me, too."

"It's settled, then," said the King. "I will leave you all to finish your beers quietly. Ferret, do you need a room?"

"I should go home to my cottage. I will walk upstairs with you."

The king slipped away quietly without disturbing the relaxed atmosphere. He walked Ferret down to the stables where she rescued her horse who had evicted the king's stallion once again.

"I promise, I put her in her own stall!" she said apologetically, raising a hand in guilt.

"She is wilful like her mistress, methinks."

“Perhaps.” Ferret saddled up her horse and mounted while the king held the horse’s bit.
“She likes you. She bites most people who go anywhere near her mouth.”

“Maybe she knows I’m her king.”

“You want me to answer that?”

“Possibly not. Thank you for coming to my son’s dinner. He genuinely needed to thank you, and he didn’t know how. I’m impressed how much he organised.”

“As I said, I only made the suggestion. Good night, King.”

“I think I prefer it when you call me Hornan. The way you say king makes me feel like a stable boy.”

Ferret laughed and galloped Merry out into the pitch-dark night.

Chapter 8 - Archer

Some people can have disappointingly fixed expectations of others, reflected Ferret, as she brushed down her horse. She had retrieved Merry earlier from where she had sneaked off for the second night running, taking the king's stallion with her. Ferret saw no reason she should have to plod through the freezing cold wearing the woollen clothes of a healer, when she could be snug and warm in her riding leathers with a longbow and sword strapped to her back. However, from the moment she had arrived at the castle four days before, all dressed up for the trip, both Terran and the King had looked at her like she had a bird sat on her head.

"Good thing I brought you and not Mab-Abin, eh Merry?"

The horse snorted as if to object to the idea of ever bringing the big lumbering dragon rather than the beautiful sleek mare. Ferret rather hoped the big lumbering dragon was stealthily hiding somewhere not too far away. She had felt him flying overhead in the early hours, but he had vanished again, which was annoying. But then, nothing about her skills was perfect, and she didn't always feel him even when he was creeping up behind her.

"I think your horse is having a bad influence on the king's mount," said Sir Terran, walking over from the main camp. Ferret had camped a short way from the others on the excuse of being the only female, but in reality, she had wanted space so she could slip away if needed. "He is awkward as hell this morning."

"The king or the horse?" Terran just looked at her. "Well, he's a fussy horse anyway. Tell Hornan to try saying good morning to the animal before he insists on saddling him up; he just wants to be appreciated."

"You really do have a different take on life to the rest of us, don't you?" commented Terran with a smile.

"No, I just take it as it is and don't try to bend it to my will; it never works in the long run."

"Far too much wisdom far too early," said the knight, laughing. "We are only a couple of leagues away from the village. Are you about ready?"

"Oh, are you all waiting for me?"

"Yes."

"Sorry, my nasty, violent sword needed sharpening. I'll be there in five minutes." Ferret gave the knight a really sweet smile, and he rolled his eyes and walked off to join the King. Ferret saddled the mare and strapped on her bedroll and bags, but her smile faded quickly. "Why do I feel this day will turn out badly, Merry? Something is not right with this tale."

"Morning, Hornan!" said Ferret brightly, trotting up to flank the king on his left. His big stallion pointedly looked away from the young mare.

"You sound well rested, Ferret. The wind and sleet didn't keep you awake?"

"What, where I was camped behind a big sheltering fir tree?"

“Are you determined to make me look like an amateur every morning?”

“Gods forbid! Not my job.”

“Stop grinning, Terran.”

“Yes, sire.”

“I keep meaning to ask you something,” said Ferret. “Where did your report come from?”

“It came through a couple of traders, why?”

“Not through your mayor in Cisson Town?”

“No, it didn’t. I thought about that myself, and I will pay him a visit on the way back. He is not really my mayor as such. He is paid through the regional taxes and not from the royal treasury, but I am concerned that I have had nothing from him.”

“It may not mean anything,” said Sir Terran. “If the traders decided not to tell the local authorities and they were the only source of information, then he might simply be in ignorance.”

“True. Worth looking in to, though.” The King looked over his shoulder at their small troop following in a column. To speed up arrangements he had told Garron and Terran to keep it to ten each of knights and archers, plus the four of them and a few pack animals.

“Worried?” asked Ferret.

“I’m not sure what we will find, to be honest,” said Hornan. “We have reached here at a good speed. So, how good are you with that bow? Garron mentioned last night it is heavier than his.”

“Is it? I have used a longbow for a long time. Several of my friends and family did, so I grew up with it. Garron probably knows more than me.”

“Probably.” The king was making light conversation of sorts, but it was not very successful.

“If you would like to up the pace, I would be happy with that,” suggested Sir Terran, looking over at Ferret behind the king’s back.

“Good idea, Terran,” said the king, and broke into a canter.

As they rode out from the woods into the small open valley overlooking the village of Farnen, Ferret had her bow out before any of the others, an arrow nocked, and had skidded her horse to a stop.

“Oh, the gods,” muttered the king as the rest of the small troop caught up and spread across the road.

The village lay in ruins, blackened and scarred. Thatched roofs were burnt away, fences torn and broken, shutters ripped from the windows, and the bodies were everywhere. Ferret could smell the burnt flesh, and before anyone could stop her, she was galloping down the hill.

“Sire?” asked Terran.

“Go!” said Hornan, and they followed her down.

Five hundred years is a long time to live by anyone’s measure, but if you have never known a massacre, there is nothing in that long life that can prepare you for what you will see. That Ferret kept her breakfast when some of the soldiers lost theirs was not to her credit; inside she was screaming. Some of the villagers had been burnt, some hacked apart, and their body parts kicked around, and some had been gutted. None had been granted an easy death.

Ferret didn’t mean to take charge, but the healer inside panicked, and she was desperate to see if any were alive. She ordered the soldiers off their horses, split them into pairs and had them search every house. Those who looked least able to cope she sent into the woods, calling out in the king’s name for any who had escaped. There was no reply, and the houses only revealed further horrors.

“Why?” asked King Hornan, looking at the speared corpse of an old man. “What did they do?” No one answered him; no one had an answer.

“Look for tools,” called Terran to his men who were coming back from their fruitless search. “We bury them all.”

“I will help,” said the king, marching into the smithy, and returning with a couple of picks and shovels.

As each horrific body was laid in the long shallow grave, Ferret searched for any personal items and collected them together; a small memento of each life snatched away.

“Why are you doing that?” asked Garron, carrying some sad, small limbs which he placed gently in the grave.

“People should be remembered. If we cannot remember them by name, then maybe this is all we can do. It isn’t much, is it?”

“No, it isn’t.”

The attack when it burst out from the trees to the north was violent and fast. Fifteen men on horseback, roughly dressed and carrying spears and swords, rode straight for the unprepared knights and archers. Hornan was standing closest to the charge with the body of an old woman in his arms, and he looked up in shock. The lead two raiders leant forward in their saddles, spears lowered, and death in their eyes, and screamed battles cries as they raced to run down the king. The knights leapt up from their bloody work, drawing their swords, and two arrows, fired in quick succession, flew just over the king’s head to rip into the necks of the two raiders, punching them backwards from their saddles. The king dropped the sad corpse, pulled his sword, and cut upwards at the next raider while the rest of the small company rallied to him.

Ferret continued loosing her arrows over the heads of the knights. Garron ran to her side, pulled his own bow, and they shot at horses and men alike, breaking the raiders’ charge so the others could finish them off. There was no doubt that these were the men responsible for the carnage in the village, and the king’s men fought with cold fury in their veins. The fight lasted only fifteen minutes but felt like an hour. When Ferret ran out of arrows, she drew her sword from her back and weighed into the fray. As the last of the raiders fell, she threw her bloodied sword to the ground, marched into the forest and emptied her stomach, tears of anger pouring down her face.

Hornan found her two hours later, sitting by the small river that ran through the village, washing her hands in the icy waters. She had returned to help with any wounds, though thankfully and almost miraculously they had all survived. The snow was falling, and it was covering her head and her back.

“Stand up,” he said.

“Go away,” she answered quietly.

“Stand up!” The king was angry.

“Why?”

The king grabbed her and hauled her to her feet. “I want to know who is this young healer that can fell two horsemen from clear across the village and can fight like any of my knights. Who are you?”

Ferret took the king’s hand and gently pulled it from where it gripped her arm. She like her father, was stronger than she looked. “I am who I say I am. I have never lied to you or to Terran.” Ferret walked passed the king and retrieved her sword, bow, and empty quiver, then collected those of her arrows still usable.

"You saved my life!" shouted the king. "And probably the lives of several others here. Why?"

"Because I thought they were worth saving!" Ferret shouted back, then called to her horse. She stowed her weapons, climbed into the saddle, and walked the horse over to the king. The man was in shock; all of them were.

"Thank you," he said. "I thought I was going to die."

"Eiferra."

"What?"

"That is my real name. Eiferra. But I prefer to be called Ferret."

"I will still call you Ferret, then."

"What are you going to do now, Hornan?"

King Hornan took a deep breath and straightened his back. This day had been enough to tear any soul in two, however hardened, but he was the king, the leader, he didn't have that luxury.

"We will finish here and then go to Cisson Town and talk to the Mayor."

"I will meet you there. I want to see him too." Ferret turned her horse and galloped south into the forest.

Terran walked over to his old friend and put his hand on his shoulder. "Hornan, before you say anything, I really didn't know that she was anything more than a healer, though she keeps plenty of secrets."

"Should I fear her, or do I welcome her?" asked Hornan. "She says she hasn't lied to us, and I think I believe her, but for every one thing we know, there are a thousand she is keeping from us, of that I am convinced."

"She still feels like a friend, to me at least. I will continue to trust her," said Terran with a frown.

The king turned and patted his friend on the cheek. "I can see now why you are so besotted with her, old friend." He walked back to the centre of the village. "Does she know you love her?" he called back over his shoulder, his tease greeted by relieved laughter from his men.

"I haven't the guts to tell her," whispered Terran to himself.

Cisson town had once been the poor capital of the tiny Prelatehood of Cisson which had been raided by both the Heinela Cwendrin and the Haftens during that long, bitter war. It had put its lot in with Kend within a couple of years of Pree's death. The modern town was only two hundred years old and none of the older buildings remained.

"It doesn't have much charm either," muttered Ferret, looking out through the window of the Tired Widow Inn at the muddy, sleet-covered street. She had ridden hard and fast from the village, wanting to put distance between herself and that scene of horror, and desperate to see Mab-Abin, who met her on the way. She had spent two hours telling him what had happened, though he had seen some from afar, and generally doing a lot of shouting and screaming. She had then ridden to Cisson town, eager for bed, beer, a warm fire, and a bath if possible. She knew it would take Hornan and his men a good two gruesome days to finish at the village before they rode to the town, which would give her time to just sit and think.

"Here you go, miss," said the young man, putting a big bowl of vegetable soup on the table. "Do you want bread? The soup has a lot of potato in it."

"No, it's fine as it is. Another beer would be good."

"Miss."

It was hardly the friendliest place, but it had big rooms and for a couple of coins they would fill a large copper with hot water in your room for bathing, which was welcome. Of course, she was only a lowly healer, but unlike her itinerant father, she had built up a decent olive farm over the years, and was not short of coin. Neither was Mab-Abin, she had noticed, but the source of his funds was another question on a growing list that she had decided was currently unimportant. She might be his rider, but she had a suspicion there was a lot he was not telling her. She was not prepared to put their growing friendship under pressure by taking advantage of his inability to lie like a human.

Ferret ate the hot soup slowly. She had left a message at the town offices that if anyone asked for her, she would be here. The sergeant at arms in the entrance hall had been bemused why anyone should ask for a young lady wearing a strange leather outfit and carrying a sword. She had pointed out that carrying a sword and holding a sword were two different things, and she was happy to do either. He had quickly written a note as requested.

Over the last few months, she had quizzed Mab-Abin about the Prelates five hundred years ago. Although he had only been here for the second half of the war, he was able to give her enough information for her to be certain that the current Preland was a shadow of its ancestor. Cisson Town symbolised everything that was wrong. It was poorly constructed, had a small population, appeared to trade hardly at all outside Kend, and though it was busy in its own way, it had no sense of ambition or optimism. It was simply the regional market town and barely fulfilled its purpose.

“Is the soup good?”

“A friendly face at last!” Ferret smiled up at Sir Terran who had disposed of his knightly attire. “Dressing down?”

“I decided that since your message had not been addressed to anyone in particular, you would probably not appreciate me storming in here with my boots and sword.”

“I am impressed! Another soup and beer, lad!” called out Ferret.

“It’s good to get out of the rain,” said Terran, sitting sideways on the bench, and leaning against the wall. “You look pleasantly clean.”

“I’m sorry I abandoned you to it, Terran. I needed to think.”

“Don’t apologise, my friend. You earned your rest, well and truly. Though I am a bit confused how you can save a king’s life and put him in a foul mood in the same breath.”

“The mood was all his own and understandable, Terran. He might have still been alive, but he looked like he wished he wasn’t.”

“A pretty good assessment, I would say.” The soup and a large pot of beer arrived, and Terran asked for some bread. “Now this is doubly welcome.”

“When did you all arrive?”

“An hour ago. We have a small barracks behind the mayor’s offices so I changed quickly and came straight here.”

“I’m flattered.”

“Trust me, it was the thought of food and a fire that was the greatest draw.” He grinned mischievously.

“How is Hornan?”

“Angry. He has sent a message to the mayor that he will see him in the morning, mostly to give himself time to calm down. He wants you to be there.”

“I want to be there as well.”

The two chatted while they ate their soup, enjoying the quiet and the warmth of the inn, and then Ferret leant back and looked at the knight.

“You haven’t asked about my fighting, Terran.”

“I think the King did that. Anyway, I reckon you will tell me when you’re ready. Do you want me to?”

“No, but I was half expecting to face a list of questions.”

“Well, perhaps it was my turn to be surprising.”

Ferret laughed. “Well, maybe it was at that.”

“Another beer and then I must get back to the barracks. We are meeting at ten so I will leave a message with the sergeant that you are to be let through. Will you be wearing your strange leathers?”

“I see no reason why I would want to put the mayor at ease, and anyway, they are not strange. Warm, tough, comfy and I don’t clunk around like a pile of old tin buckets!”

Terran chuckled. “I suppose you have a point. They certainly make an impression, especially when you are chucking broadheads at people. By the way, Hornan said he felt the first arrow pass right by his ear.”

“Oh, he was fine. It’s my sword work he needs to worry about; that really is more luck than judgement.”

“Want me to help you with that?”

“Seriously?”

“Very seriously. Jokes aside, you were formidable at that sad village, and Garron is close to asking you to marry him after the way you used your bow. But if you want to train, I will work with you. At the very least I think I owe you, but I would also like to.”

Ferret studied the man through one eye. “Well then, I can hardly refuse, can I?”

It was the same sergeant again that met her in the entrance hall of the town offices. As a small compromise, she had given her leathers a bit of a scrub and removed any remaining flecks of blood from her sword, but she was in no mood to go any further.

“I must ask you to leave your sword and bow, miss,” the sergeant told her, barring her way.

“Will you be asking the king or his first knight to be leaving theirs?”

“Er, no miss.”

“Good. Then you will not be asking me to leave mine.”

“But I do not know you, miss.”

“And I suggest you keep it that way. However, either you let me through as I am or we wait for the king to tell you to. I’m easy either way.”

There was something about a long life that made one bossy, Ferret had realised somewhere around her three-hundredth birthday. She put it down to all those times when she had been younger and had thought of the perfect retort sometime after the event. Well, many years later, she had the luxury of now using those stored up lines to her advantage. The sergeant stepped aside and told her to go up the wide flight of stairs and into the mayor’s outer office where the king stood waiting.

“This is posher than your burh,” commented Ferret, walking in. “Are you being kept waiting?”

“I panicked this morning thinking you would turn up early, so I thought I better get here first. The Mayor is on his way, I gather, and yes, it is posher than mine.”

“More garish too. I prefer yours. Interesting paintings, though. I wonder where he got them?”

“I am more interested in how he paid for them,” said Hornan with a frown.

“Do you know this man?”

“He has only been in office for eight months after the previous mayor died in a riding accident. I have met him the once when I was last here, though that was in the barracks, not in the town offices.”

“I am surprised he didn’t ask to meet you there again, considering his spending here.”

“He did,” replied Hornan. “That is why we are waiting for him as he went to the barracks where he thought we would be.”

Ferret smiled broadly. “See, I knew one of you two would cheer me up.”

“Your Majesty, I must apologise!” The mayor of Cisson Town and, by association, the region that had once been Cisson, was a stocky but strong individual with greying hair and a close-cropped beard. He bowed formally but showed no signs of subservience.

“Mayor Herbet, this is Sir Terran and this lady is Ferret, and she is my adviser. If you would take us into your office?”

“Of course, your majesty.” The man showed them through the ornate double doors between two tall paintings of some unnamed ancestors, perhaps. “Please, be seated, sire,” said Herbet, ringing a small bell. “I will order tea.”

“No need, Herbet, this won’t take long.”

The Mayor waved away the boy who had trotted in through the doors, and smiled at the king. “I was not expecting a royal visit, sire,” he said. “Especially in such inclement weather.”

“Cut the niceties, man. We have just returned from a village up by your northern border, and I have a very simple question for you. Why the bloody hell has an entire village of my people been massacred and burnt in the last few weeks, and you haven’t said a thing?”

Herbet blinked. “I’m sorry, sire, your majesty. I really do not know what you are talking about.”

“The village of Farnen, have you heard of it?”

“There are many villages in the province, sire.”

“Have you heard of it or not?”

“Er, no, sire. I’m afraid I haven’t.” The man, looking nervous, reached for his small bell.

“Leave it, Herbet. You are the mayor.” The king was angry, and he was using his advantage in height to good effect. Ferret watched the mayor very closely, and closed her eyes for a second.”

“Yes, sire. So, what has happened in the village? I can send people to help the survivors, sire.”

“There are no bloody survivors, Herbet!” growled the king. “It was a massacre; do you know the meaning of the word? They are all dead, and we spent two days burying them!”

Ferret’s eyes snapped opened, and she blinked in confusion. The mayor was pleased! She concentrated again.

“This is terrible news, sire; terrible. Please, I should send for my advisers immediately. I need to investigate this.”

“I haven’t finished, Herbet. I want to know how is it that I, who am based twenty leagues that way in Weidess Burh, came to discover there were problems in the north of your province, and yet you know nothing! Do you keep track of what is going on in your region?”

"I rely on regular reports, sire, but we have many tiny villages here, it is difficult to keep track of everything all of the time."

"You mean apart from when you are collecting taxes, I assume. This building has had a good coat of paint since I last saw it."

"It was in need of repair, sire. I have done but the bare minimum and put up a few items to reflect our region's ancient history, like the period paintings of Lady Pree and General Farthing by my door."

Ferret stifled a laugh. The two paintings had shown two tall, middle-aged people with ducal robes and long dark hair.

Hornan studied the man carefully. "You are salaried by the good people of this province, Herbet, and at this precise moment, I am unsure whether their investment in you is worthwhile. I am shocked that you are keener to show me two worthless paintings than you are to know details of the horrific death of an entire village! Now, I want to know what you are proposing to do about it!"

"Of course, sire, and I apologise, I did not mean to offend. I have good men working for me, and I will dispatch them to the area to find out what they can from any of the other villages close by and any of the small farms. I assure you I will work on this quickly. I will send you my report to Weidess Burh as soon as I can. I assume you will be leaving shortly? The weather looks like it is closing in fast."

"I will let you know what I am doing when I decide for myself." The king turned on his heel, left the office and thundered down the stairs followed by Sir Terran and Ferret. He said nothing and marched straight to the barracks.

"Hornan, wait!" Ferret ran up to the man, stopping him.

"What?" The King was still angry. They all were.

"He was lying," said Ferret.

"What about? He didn't say anything, the annoying man."

"He knew about the massacre."

"What? Ferret, how can you possibly know that?"

"I don't know. But he was lying. When you told him about the village, he was shocked; not that it had happened, but that you knew about it and were here."

"I saw surprise, but nothing else."

"And then when you told him that all were dead he looked, I don't know, relieved. Pleased even!"

"You are reading too much into this." The king turned to leave.

Ferret grabbed his arm. "Then tell me why the young boy who came to serve tea is scampering across the square looking like he has just seen a monster?"

The king looked up and saw the boy disappear down an alley. He frowned. "We will go back."

"No, Hornan. Go back to the barracks. I will wait here and watch. Terran, get out of your tinplate and back here as fast as you can."

"Why?" the knight asked.

"We need to keep an eye on the mayor. If my guesses are correct, and he knew all about this, then he won't sit in his office sipping tea. He is not a stupid man, and he's up to something."

The knight looked up at the king. "Well, sire?"

“Oh, do it, whatever.” He looked at Ferret and shook his head. “I owe you my life, but I do not understand what you are up to. I am deciding to trust you and your instincts, mostly because I trust Terran, but that can change.” He turned and strode back to the barracks followed by the knight. Ferret walked quietly back to the square, stood at the corner of the over-decorated town offices, and looked across the poor market as the snow began to fall.

“Oh, wonderful!” she said to herself, grumbling at the sky. “Now, daddy mine, I know your trick about not being noticed. The question is whether I can stop anyone noticing a bloody big knight as well. Is that possible?”

In the end, Ferret opted for just picking a more shaded spot and keeping Terran behind her.

“What are you playing at, Ferret?” he asked as they took up position.

“I am playing at nothing, Terran. That man was definitely lying, and I want to know why.”

“How can you tell?”

“How do I know when you have a big boil on your nose? Sometimes women notice things that men don’t.”

Terran looked unconvinced. “What are we looking for?”

“Well, that to start with.” She pointed over to the far side of the square where the boy, plainly freezing cold, was running back to the town offices grasping something in his hand.

“A message?” ventured Terran.

“Probably. A short one, by the looks of it, which is good.”

“Why?”

“Because that means that at some point the mayor is going to want to have a longer conversation. With any luck, it will be soon. I’m frozen!”

Terran chuckled. “So, what about those two ghastly paintings of Pree and General Farthing?”

“Well, I’m no great historian, Terran, but those weren’t of them, that is for certain.”

“How do you know?”

“Well, for a start, Pree, very famously, had red hair!”

“I had forgotten that. So, who are they then?”

“Probably something he just bought from somewhere.” She actually had a good idea what they were, and they had a distinctly Heinela Cwendrin feel to them. Many of the families in the West had sold artwork over the years as their old ducal system collapsed and they became desperate for coin.

“That was quick,” said Terran pointing. Mayor Herbet appeared at the front of the offices wearing a thick coat which he pulled tightly around him, and walked to the far side of the market.

“How well do you know this town, Terran?”

“Hardly at all.”

“Well, let’s hope we don’t lose him.”

Ferret slipped out of their hiding place and trotted across the square followed by Terran. The small woman, dressed in her riding leathers, couldn’t help but smile as she ducked and dived through the stalls on the trail of the lying mayor. She thought of all those stories Mab-Abin had told her about Mistry; the way she had gone off on little lone missions on the trail of some important piece of information. Of course, Ferret had nowhere near the skills of that enterprising little cheese maker, but it was nice to think that she was treading in her footsteps. After all, Mistry was one of her father’s favourite people.

“What’s so funny?” asked Terran, trying to keep up.

“Oh, just thinking about a distant family friend who liked living dangerously.”

“You have taken after them.”

“I wish I had! Oh, where has he gone?” Ferret looked around desperately then kicked herself and closed her eyes. “That way!” It was a half guess.

“I didn’t see him!”

“I just caught a glimpse. Come on.”

She cursed herself for her stupidity. Her father had spent much of his life making coin as a finder, believing then that it was one of a number of specific skills, rather than part of a general skill all Ancients possessed. But in his few notes, he had mentioned that finding people was a whole lot easier if you had touched them or held something related to them. Ferret had hardly ever used that side of her skill and had not thought it through. Swordplay was not the only thing she should think about practising. Still, she had a vague idea what she was chasing; it would help.

“He is down the bottom of the street,” said Terran. “Quick, in here!” He pulled her into an alley and looked around the corner.

“What?”

“He stopped and turned. I hope he didn’t see us.”

“What is he doing now?” asked Ferret.

“Come on, he has turned off right. Maybe he’s suspicious.”

“Me first then; I’m smaller.”

They trotted down the side street and peeked around the corner.

“Can you see him?” asked Terran.

“No, I can’t. Hang on, there’s a tavern down there.”

“We might get seen!” Terran pulled her back.

“Or we might miss what he is up to!” Ferret slipped down the narrow lane and stopped by the Tavern, peeking through the leaded windows. It was dark and smoky inside, but this was something she could do. She concentrated and peered closer.

“Well?”

“He’s in there, on the far side. It has those little booths along the wall. I think we can get in without him noticing.”

“You can see in there?”

“You must be getting old, Sir Knight,” remarked Ferret with a chuckle and entered through the side door of the Tavern.

Glass in windows or anywhere else had become rarer over the last five hundred years and was hardly ever seen in villages or even in smaller rural towns. But some taverns like The Red Siren, a strangely nautical name to find in a landlocked country, had small leaded windows, and often incorporated booths along their back walls divided by dark wooden panels. Ferret slipped into the empty booth next to where the mayor sat and pulled Terran in to sit next to her. When the barmaid came to take their order, she asked for a flagon and two mugs using the rural drawl of her homeland.

“That was neat,” whispered Terran.

Ferret put her finger to her lips. “You just sit there looking pretty, sir!” she said in a cheeky tone. “Beer first, I always like my beer first!” Terran’s eyes opened wide, and Ferret stifled a giggle. “Can you hear anything?” she mouthed at him, putting her head against the wooden dividing wall.

Terran put his ear to the panel and listened. He shook his head.

“Here you go,” said the barmaid, bringing their order. “Three coins, love.” Terran paid, and the girl left.

“I thought we had done our business.” A large man eased himself into the mayor’s booth and sat down, his back to Ferret and Terran.

“Apparently not as it was meant to be done.” That was the mayor, and he didn’t sound pleased.

“I got the girls, four of them, and they’re already over the border in the old Prelate’s Hunting Lodge. You got your coin, and we went back and made sure there were no loose tongues.”

“You should have done that in the first place or been more discreet. Someone got word out about the raid before you got back up there.

“You are meant to be sorting out your own region, Herbet. If you want us to give you fighters, you have to show you can run Cisson properly, which means keeping your people under control.”

“I can’t do anything if you screw up.”

“You know the deal. You supply us with girls to trade and show you can play your part; we help you annex your little kingdom.”

“Well, because you didn’t do your job properly, I now have the king sitting in his barracks behind my town hall screaming that someone has just wiped one of his precious little villages off the map.”

“Your problem, Mr Mayor. You don’t get to run your area without pissing off some silly little king or other. I suggest you start showing some muscle and stop complaining to me. I have men waiting around the village in case he turns up there.”

“He’s already been up there. No mention of your guards. Perhaps you should go and see if they are still there or have just bugged off!”

The two fell silent, and Ferret and Terran strained to hear what was going on.

“I will send someone to check, Herbet. I suggest you work out a way to deal with your king.” They heard the man get up from the table and watched him head for the door. Then they heard the mayor stand.

“Oh, shit!” mouthed Ferret at Terran. He looked back at her in panic, and she suddenly pulled him close for a fake kiss, covering their faces with her hand while the mayor march past and out of the door.

“Er...” said Terran as she pulled away.

“Quick, we need to grab him!” Ferret pushed the knight out of the booth, and they shot out through the door.

“Where did he go?” asked Terran.

“That way!” replied Ferret, seeing the mayor disappear down another lane.

“That is the opposite way from the square,” said Terran as they ran down the lane after him. He skidded to a halt. “There!” Ahead, the mayor had stopped and was talking to a young girl, too lightly dressed for the winter weather.

“Wait here,” Ferret told the knight. She walked casually up the road and smiled at the girl. “Sorry, love; he’s mine.” The girl jumped; she hadn’t even noticed the Ancient approach.

“This is my stretch!” she snapped, recovering from her surprise.

The mayor spun around. “You!”

“Yes, me. Run, girl!” The young girl realising this was something she did not want to get involved with, vanished down an alley. Ferret looked at the mayor. “Please do not pull that

knife, Mr Mayor. Oh, idiot!” Ferret grabbed his wrist, planted her hand on the back of his neck, and he collapsed on the road. Ferret shook her head. “Damn, that hurt!”

“What did you do?” Terran came running up and stared down at the comatose mayor.

“Gave myself a severe headache. Now, this is why you are here, Sir Knight.” Sir Terran looked at her blankly. “You get to carry him!”

“We have to rescue them,” insisted Ferret.

“You are talking of raiding Hebbut,” said the King in horror. The mayor had given no further details, despite some pretty rigorous questioning, and was now chained in a cell in the barracks.

“They have taken four young girls; I have no idea how young. That is four children of the people who were massacred in that village. Are you really suggesting we leave them?”

“No, I am not.” The king dragged his hand through his hair. “But we cannot just storm into another country.”

“Then we don’t storm. We go quietly.”

“Ferret is right, sire,” said Garron. “Just three or four of us. People still trade over the pass, so we go in with a cart and a couple of horses like we’re buying something. The snow has turned to rain so it’ll be clear.”

“But it won’t stay that way,” said Ferret. “If the snows come back, the pass will close, and then it will be impossible.” It wasn’t quite impossible, of course, not for her, but she couldn’t do this on her own.

“Do we know where they are?” asked the king, still obviously worried.

“I do,” said Sir Terran. “He said the Prelate’s Hunting Lodge. I know where that is. It’s in woodland near the foot of the pass. It was partly ruined, but traders used to use it as a meeting place.” Terran’s father had been a trader, and as a boy Terran had accompanied him on trips. “It sounds like it must have been taken over by this man the mayor met. Makes sense; it would make a good base.”

“And just four of you could do this?” asked Hornan.

“It’s worth trying,” said Garron. “If we get there and it’s too well guarded, then we come back and think of another plan. But at least we will know a lot more.”

“Damn.” Ferret put her hand on her head.

“What now?” growled Hornan.

“Sorry, I’m going to have to go. The man said he was going to send someone up there to check on the guards.” Ferret stood, quickly realising there was no easy explanation for what she was about to do, and ran for the door. “You sort out a cart and go on to the pass. I’ll meet you on the border.” And she legged it out of the barracks.

“She is going to have to answer a lot of questions one day,” said the king, scowling. “Well, get on with it; she’s in charge.”

“Mab-Abin, where are you!” Ferret was galloping up the road towards Farnen on Merry, looking up into the night sky. “Come on, darling, I know you are up there!”

Ahead of her, a huge shadow crashed down through the trees and landed on the road. Merry skidded to a halt and Ferret grabbed her bags and weapons off the mare and put her hand on the horse’s head.

“Now go.” The horse galloped up the road. “Sorry, dragon boy, but we have heaps of trouble.”

“Well, about time. I was getting bored.”

“Nothing worse than a bored dragon, I suppose.” She jumped up onto his back. “We need to fly back up towards that terrible village, but we are looking for a lone man on a horse.”

“What do we do when we find him?”

“Four young girls have been kidnapped by the raiders who burnt that village. He’s on the way to warn the captors.”

Mab-Abin didn’t bother to reply, and just leapt into the air.

With only one moon up and the sky cloudy, even Mab-Abin with his sharp eyes and Ferret with her strange way of seeing at night were having trouble.

“Are you certain someone was on their way?” called back the Draig yr Anialr.

“Going by the speed the man left the tavern, yes. I’m trying to work out where he would be by now. He would have left five hours or so before I left and I was on the road for an hour before I found you.”

“Actually, I found you.”

“Picky. Anyway, he has twenty leagues to ride. If he is on one horse ...” Mab-Abin flew higher and turned back. “What?” asked Ferret, grabbing hold of the hides.

“We’ve overshot,” answered the dragon. “Unless his horse has grown wings he cannot be this far ahead; I’m flying too fast.”

“See, this is why I need you so much!” Ferret put her hands on his warm neck in appreciation, and she felt him rumble quietly. “So how far back?”

“Not far,” shouted Mab-Abin. “Half an hour maybe? Watch carefully.”

Ferret slid forward till she was up on the dragon’s neck. It was not her favourite position to ride, but it afforded her a better view of the ground. Mab-Abin was flying only four times the height of the trees along the sparsely wooded road. Much of Kend was forested, but the northern half, what had been Cisson, was far less so, though the village of Farnen was surrounded by small forested hills. Mab-Abin had explained that in his day, the entire area was used for grazing, and there had been no large forests at all.

“What’s that?” Ferret pointed ahead.

“Someone camped?”

“Makes sense. It’s a dark night.”

“Do you want me to drop you off?”

“No, we haven’t got time. Go scare him, Abin.”

“With pleasure.”

When Mab-Abin ripped the canvas away, they could see the unfortunate messenger was dressed like those who had attacked the king’s party in Farnen. Ferret was glad he ran away screaming while they had chased his horse in the opposite direction; if he had put up a fight, Mab-Abin would have killed him.

“That is that problem solved. Now, get us up to the border. Have you heard of the Prelates Hunting Lodge in Hebbut?”

“It was rather famous, thanks to your daddy.”

“Why?”

“I’ll explain on the way.”

“Why live here where we first camped?”

“Not a good choice?”

"Excellent choice. Nice view, few neighbours, stream you can show your body off in..."

"Have you got a thing about me being nude?"

"You and me, the same person, remember? So, it must be you with the thing."

"Not strictly true. You're in there too."

"Yeah, but things I know, not my warped personality flaws. See, that is you again. I never thought of myself as warped."

"Maybe."

"So, why live here?"

"All of what you said. That and the big fella likes it."

"He's not moving in, is he?"

"No, he likes being with his brother in the mountains. But he does like coming to play."

"You have developed a crush on Bel-Sendinar."

"He makes me feel good, and he's very funny and naughty."

"Ah, your sort of boy through and through. Well, what are we going to do today?"

"I must talk to Snowy and Mab-Tok tomorrow and tell them everything we have found out so far. Have I got this right? If I have, then Pree wasn't the Cwendrina at all, and Geezen pulled a fast one on us."

"Snowy is not going to like that; she took that oath seriously."

"Yes, and I am not sure that oath is quite what she thinks it is either. It all makes my head hurt! Still, not today."

"So, as I asked, what we going to do today?"

"Absolutely nothing!"

"Perfect."

Chapter 9 - Dragon

Ferret suspected her horse must have taken some personal detour because Merry arrived only two hours before the wagon and the original small company with some extra soldiers from the barracks in Cisson.

“Want to explain?” said King Hornan, riding up to where Ferret was sitting on a rock. Two days of rain had washed the last of the snow from the pass, but the weather was still icy and the clouds ominous.

“I had to catch that messenger before he discovered the patrol was missing and came north to warn his people in Hebbut.”

“And did you catch him?”

“He is now on foot.”

Hornan frowned at her. “I am still uncertain about this, Ferret. But since Garron, Terran and Sovan, the other knight joining you, are convinced this is a good idea, I’m going along with it. You will still have a lot of questions to answer at some point.”

“Hornan, I am just trying to do what is best.”

The king looked up at the sky. “Well, I suggest you four get on with it.”

“Can you look after my horse?” asked Ferret. “I will drive the wagon. I don’t think they will believe I’m a guard.”

“More fool they.” The king rode back to his soldiers and sent the wagon up the road to meet her.

“Sod it,” said Ferret to herself. “I really need you to trust me, Hornan, and I’m driving you away somehow.” She might be becoming a better rider, better archer, and better fighter, but the many years she had spent on her own at her villa had left her hopeless when it came to dealing with some people. Against her better judgement, she was trying to turn into a Mistry, or even perhaps her father, and deep inside she knew she was neither of them. She was most comfortable sitting on a beach reading or tending her olive groves. Much to her amusement, Mab-Abin shared her perspective. She jumped down from the rock, stowed her bows and bedroll under the canvas covering the wagon and climbed up next to Sovan.

“I will take the reins,” she said. “I look silly as your guard.” The man had to be over six and a half feet tall.

He grinned. “Fine by me; I hate driving.”

“I am rather fond of it, as it happens. Oh, one moment.” She turned and whistled for Merry, who had taken up position behind the wagon. “Go bother the king’s stallion, girl,” she told the horse and sent her back down the road with a soft smack to the rear.

“I wish my horse was so obedient,” said Sovan with a chuckle.

“Believe me, she is not. It only works if I give her something she wants to do.” Ferret sat back down and grabbed the reins. “Slow for this first bit; the road is a potholed.

“How do you know?” asked Terran suspiciously.

“I rode through for a bit to see if anyone was guarding.” Well, it was nearly true. She rode, just not on a horse.

“And?”

“Not a soul. How far is this hunting lodge?”

“Just a couple of leagues once we’re through the pass,” said Terran, walking his horse alongside the wagon.

“I suggest you and Garron ride ahead and scout once we are into Hebbut. What sort of country is it?”

“Very hilly with some high moorland to the east. The country seat of government changes depending on who is in charge, but there are no big towns. I don’t know much of its history, but my father always said people here were very conservative and tended not to travel except for basic trading. This pass used to be a major trade route between the south and the north, but other passes have taken over in recent years, and it’s only used for local trade now. I have no idea whether we will see anyone else or not.”

“What are we trading if we do?” asked Sovan.

“They produce beer and it is generally good so no one will be surprised if you are looking to buy kegs. A lot of trade is speculative now, but say you are from Caan rather than Kend. They trade north more than we do.”

“Have you ever thought you are in the wrong job, Terran?” asked Garron.

“Frequently. Especially in the last few days.” Terran gave Ferret a long look.

Terran and Garron set off on their own in the morning, and Ferret and Sovan walked the wagon down the long trail from the pass. They met two traders on the way, both with packhorses, but other than a courteous good morning, nothing else was said, so their story was not put to the test.

“If we pull this off, we are going to have to really push these beasts back up the hill to the pass,” said Sovan to Ferret.

“I know. It worries me. We don’t know how young these girls are or whether they can ride, so we needed the wagon. There were only a couple of horses in their village.”

“It’s one of the issues that bothers the king,” said the big knight. “Good horses are expensive, and most people cannot afford them, but with few people riding, news and trade are slow. The raid on Farnen could have gone unnoticed for months, especially if the snows had been heavier.”

“Do you think they timed the raid for winter intentionally?” Ferret asked the older knight. He looked like he might be ten years senior to Sir Terran, but all the knights were a battered lot and it was sometimes difficult to tell.

“Possibly. It does make sense. It worries me more the raiders came back and massacred the villagers after they had captured the girls. Why would they do that?”

“Tying up loose ends, sickeningly, if we heard right. I wish I could think of a way of getting Herbert to speak. Hitting him just makes him spew out rubbish.”

“It always does,” said Sovan.

Frustratingly, Mab-Abin had told her that Weasel and Mab-Tok had brewed up some painkiller that hadn’t worked, but it had made people drunk-like and more truthful than they intended. But he had absolutely no idea what was in it, how they made it, or anything else. At

least Ferret knew there was a way, but had no clue where to start, especially since it had been an accident.

“Is that the boys coming back?”

“There is no way I am going to refer to my knight commander as a boy, even if he is younger than I am,” said Sovan, laughing. “But yes, that’s them.”

“We should rest these horses anyway so I am going to pull in under those trees.” Ferret guided the four carthorses between a handful of ragged old ashes and put on the brake. Though the pass itself had been treeless, the woods were thicker here, mostly beech and ash trees with the occasional oak. Ferret jumped down and checked on the horses as Sir Terran and Garron rode up.

“It’s about a league further on from here by road,” said Terran, sliding from his saddle. Neither he nor Garron were on their usual distinctive horses and had picked up more ordinary animals from somewhere. “We didn’t get very close, but it’s been repaired since I last saw it years ago.”

“Heavily guarded?” asked Sovan.

“A few guards, yes, but no fence. They have some men on the road to the lodge.”

“How heavily forested is it?” asked Ferret. She knew part of the answer already, of course. She and Mab-Abin had scouted it out, but that had been from the air.

“It’s open to the northern frontage, but the treeline comes nearly up to the back wall on the south.”

“Enough to cover us?”

“If we’re careful. This could go very wrong you know, Ferret,” Sir Terran pointed out.

“I know,” she said, patting one of the horses. “We don’t even know where these girls are being held or if they’re still there.”

“That we do know. We overheard a senior guard tell a couple of the men on the road that they were expecting two groups of buyers and to send them straight to the house. I reckon that’s for the girls.”

“Could we pose as those buyers?”

“Forget it, Ferret. They are possibly well known to the guards. No, we must stick to the first plan. I suggest we go very early in the morning.” Terran turned to see whether Sovan and Garron were out of earshot. “Ferret, I need help here.”

“How?”

“A bit of honesty. Twice now I have seen you ride off in pitch darkness without batting an eyelid. I have no idea why I’ve not thought about it before, but you seem to be able to do things that I just can’t. Also, when we were following Herbet, you walked right up to him and that young prostitute and neither even noticed you coming until you were next to them.”

“What are you asking?” she said quietly.

“Ferret, what you want to do could get the four of us killed. There are far more guards than there are of us, and we are trying to break into a defended and occupied lodge. If you can do anything to make it safer, then I have to know. Not just for me, but for Garron and Sovan. They are my friends, and though I agree we have to rescue those girls, I don’t want to just throw lives away.” Ferret leant on the back of one of the big horses and looked over to the knight thoughtfully. “Look, I’m not asking you to reveal some great secret or to tell me things you absolutely don’t want me to know; I respect you too much for that. But this is not the time for tricks or you sneaking off. Hornan was really annoyed by you just leaving without explaining properly, and I agree with him.”

Ferret had known this was going to happen at some point. They already knew because of how she helped the prince that she was far more than an ordinary healer, although she was surprised they had not questioned it more. It did not take a big leap of imagination to guess that she had other skills too, but she did not like the idea of revealing herself, especially to Terran. The man was growing on her, and she did not want to ruin their friendship because he stopped treating her as just an ordinary woman.

“Do you trust me, Terran?”

“Yes, I do. You worry me, I will admit that, but I still trust you.”

“Then take me to the back of the house and I’ll try to get the girls out while the guards are still asleep. You are right, I don’t need light. And I’m sorry.”

“What for?”

“For being scared, mostly.”

“Are you sure about this?” whispered Terran. “I’m now worried I have forced you into something even more dangerous.”

“No, you were right,” said Ferret. “Give me half an hour and if I am not back by then, get around to the front of the house and make lots of noise; it means I need the distraction.”

“We will,” said Terran. “Be careful. Please.”

Ferret smiled at him, then boosted by the tall Sovan, she jumped up onto the back wall of the house and dropped down into the yard by the kitchen. With only four of them, they had to keep the plan very simple. They had brought the horses and wagon as far down the road as they had dared, and using the light from the moon, and following Ferret’s lead, had made it through the woods to the back of the house. To the Ancient’s relief, the lodge was not some grand palace. Going by the story that Mab-Abin had told her of how Weasel extracted the former Prelate with the help of some of the older dragons, she was confident the girls would be in the back of the building somewhere. The question was whether she could find her way around unnoticed.

Moving quietly, Ferret unlocked the back gate of the yard and propped it open with a stone to give her an easy way out. Now she had to try the trick she hadn’t told Terran about; finding. Ever since the village, she had been carrying a leather bag with the handful of small personal items she had recovered from the corpses of the villagers. She had no idea whether she could use these or not, or how accurate it would be, but they had to put her closer to the girls than using nothing. Closing her eyes, she put her hand into the small bag and let her fingers drift through the few beads, stones and thin, almost worthless chains and trinkets while she put her other hand on the wall of the kitchen.

In her father’s notes, she had found references to the world being like a picture made up of layers. She used this idea when healing, as she suspected he must have done, but she hadn’t tried it for anything like this in quite so much detail. Keeping her eyes closed she pushed her mind along the stone walls and thought about the connections between everything that made up the lodge. Slowly, she recreated the building in front of her, stone by stone until she had a rough shape. She began to feel dizzy; this was harder than she thought it would be. Next, she added everything she would expect to find in a building; floors, ceilings, and anything that might be larger pieces of furniture. This wasn’t invention, she was finding everything by how it was connected to everything else, making form out of unrecognisable shadows. She was conscious she was feeling nauseous and realised she was adding too much detail. If she was sure the children were downstairs, then she could forget the upstairs. She discarded that part of her

picture and immediately felt better. Everything she found and connected she then had to hang onto as if someone was piling it on top of her.

Now, with an idea of shape, she should be able to find her way around, but it would be better if she could narrow it down more. Ferret looked for things that were not the house, not stone and wood, but had life and feeling. Bit by bit, she added small, organic blurs to her picture, each of them resembling a person or a dog, possibly, or even something as small as a rat. Telling which was which was almost impossible. The weight started growing again so she discarded some of the building where she had found nothing, places that were empty of significant life. She took a long slow breath and hoped the next stage of her plan worked. She let part of her mind wander into the bag while at the same time touching each of the organic blurs in her picture. All she needed to find was a sense of the familiar, some slight connection between the items in the bag and any of the shapes she held in her mind. Step by step, blur by blur, she compared one against the other. Nothing. And then nothing again. And then, something! She tried again. It was a simple wooden necklace, and it connected with a shape in a room not far from the kitchen. She felt through the room a bit more. Another blur had a connection, a very slight connection, to a stone brooch. She had found them. She took her hand out of the bag and dismissed the rest of the building except that between the kitchen and the room. She touched the figures once again. Seven? Not four. There were seven of them!

Ferret brushed the vision away and opened her eyes. Her face was soaking with sweat, and she felt hot and shaky. She stretched her neck to reduce her headache, then quietly unlatched the door of the kitchen and stepped into the house.

“What was she waiting for?” The three men had watched Ferret leaning against the wall through the open gate, though they had moved farther back into the woods. She had been standing there for ten minutes, but Terran stopped them going to her.

“She knows what she is doing,” he hissed. “Look, she’s gone in now.”

“Terran, what is going on?” asked Garron. “Who is she really?”

“Not now. Look, I don’t know, but we can trust her, I am positive of that, and she is taking an enormous risk. She needs us.”

“I’m sorry; you are right. You stay here, and Sovan and I will make our way around to the front in case you need that distraction.”

“Thanks, Garron,” said Terran, and watched the two men slip into the gloom. Terran and Ferret had thought about the timing carefully. Although Ferret could see in the dark, the men could not and neither could the girls nor the wagon horses. So, they had left it to nearly dawn so there would be some light when they came to escape. She had said half an hour, and it was halfway through that time already by Terran’s reckoning. Ferret said she could make her way through the darkened house on her own without being discovered if she was careful, but what would happen when she had four young girls in tow?

Ferret poked her head out of the kitchen door and into the back corridor. From her finding, the girls were in a room off a side passage about twenty paces to her left. She guessed the door would be locked and had picked up a thick meat hook from the kitchen on her way through. The corridor was empty and silent, but the house was not completely still, and she could hear movement in the distance somewhere. She slipped down the dark corridor, feeling her way with her mind, concentrating on the floor in particular. She couldn’t see in much detail and when doing this trick through woods she would trip over roots if she didn’t concentrate. She was

pleased it was so dark down here; for a corridor to be patrolled or guarded, there would need to be more light than this. Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen. Ferret became aware of an opening on her left which must be the passageway she was looking for. She turned and felt her way with her hands, then rested her head against the wall, sending her mind through into the room. Yes, the girls were there, and she could feel them clearly now. On a hunch, she stepped to the opposite wall and felt through into the other room. Damn, two men. Guards? Impossible to tell, but she thought they were asleep.

Ferret made her way quietly to the girl's room. The door was bolted, but there was no lock. She ran her hands up and down the door; two more bolts. As gently as she could, she slid the bolts open one by one. The first moved quietly, but the second was stiff and squeaked. Oil would have been a better choice than a meat hook! She heard some childish murmuring from behind the door. At least one of the children sounded very young. She wriggled the bolt but stopped when there was a cough from the room opposite. Ferret froze and waited. The coughing settled into silence. She finished with the second bolt and tried to slide the last one. This was even stiffer, and she spat on it, hoping that would ease it slightly. The bolt squeaked, and she heard a noise from the room opposite again.

"Did you hear something?"

"What? I was asleep!"

"Sorry. Thought I heard something."

"Idiot!"

Ferret could hear one of the men trying to get comfortable. Slowly, she worked the bolt open then carefully unlatched the door. When she opened it, her heart sank. Huddled together in the middle of the room were seven girls wearing thin sackcloth clothes, filthy dirty, and all awake. She didn't need her senses to smell the fear and realise that they were cold, thirsty, and starving.

"Shush!" she whispered as she entered the room and closed the door behind her. "My name is Ferret, and I have come to take you home."

"Has my mummy sent you?" The girl sounded like she was eight or ten years old.

"You must be silent as a mouse!"

"I can't see you!" said another girl. She sounded older, but not much.

"Please, you must be quiet. Here." She knelt down and held out her hand to the small group and let them all touch her. One girl took her hand and held it to her cheek. Ferret could feel the cold tears run over her hand. "Hold hands, all of you. We must be quiet. Don't say anything."

Ferret stood up, pulling one girl to her feet, the others following. The girls were scared, but staying behind was more frightening than trusting her, she hoped. She crept to the door and opened it again.

"They're talking, mate."

"Oh, go to sleep."

"Shall I go shut them up?"

"They haven't eaten in three days, they won't talk long. Anyway, they'll be moved today, so just go back to sleep!"

The men fell silent again, and Ferret moved out into the passage, pulling the little train of girls behind her. She crept to where the passage joined the back corridor, noticing a few dancing shadows from a distant light. She stopped still and felt the girls crowd in behind her in the dark. Gingerly, she peeked around the corner and could see a lamp bobbing up and down. The light

stopped, and she heard someone laughing. Then, in the lamplight, she saw three people enter the kitchen.

“Damn!” she muttered.

Terran risked moving back towards the gate that led into the kitchen yard. He had been certain he had heard something and the half hour was up.

“Oh, what bloody idiot left the gate open?”

“You probably did, prat. You drank enough last night.”

“Yeah, well. I was in the mood. Still, lucky not to have some bear digging around out here. You got the water on?”

“Lighting the fires now and will have coffee on in a minute. Get this place all woken up nice!”

The gate slammed shut, and the conversation faded back into the building.

“Oh, bugger it!” said Terran to himself. There was no way Ferret was getting out that way. Time for the backup plan. He looked up at the sky; it was getting lighter. The knight made his way around the side of the building staying within the trees, trying to find where Garron and Sovan had hidden.

“Terran, over here!” It was barely a whisper, but he followed the voice and found his two men.

“Ferret?” asked Sovan.

“Not yet. The kitchen staff are awake and have bolted the back gate.”

“How is she going to get out?”

“I don’t know. We need to create a diversion. Any ideas?”

“There is a guard shed just over there. It’s just a wooden shack really.”

“Anyone in it?”

“Haven’t seen anyone,” replied Garron. “But we could set fire to it.”

“Bit dramatic!”

“Well, there are only three of us. I don’t know what else we can do!”

“Sovan, you and I will go and see if we can set it on fire without anyone seeing us. Garron, string your bow and cover that front door.”

“Sir.”

Ferret crept down towards the kitchen with the girls. On her way in she had noticed it had a bolt on the door, and she wanted to make sure the kitchen staff could not come out behind her. There was already a fair amount of clattering and crashing of pots and pans so she was less worried about noise, but she still had to keep the children quiet. Ferret thought that none of them was less than eight or nine years old, but to her senses they were all weak and ill, and the stench from them was almost overwhelming. They must have been dumped in the room and ignored completely. Just as she reached the kitchen door, it swung open, and a small man backed out holding a wooden crate.

“I’ll be back in ten minutes. Get all those potatoes peeled and washed, and we need a second batch of dough made up.”

“We will. Not our fault you have a hangover!”

“Shut up!” The man pushed the door shut with his foot then froze when he felt a very sharp blade at his neck.

“Put that box down very quietly,” whispered Ferret in his ear. The man bent his knees and put the box on the floor. “Good man. Now kneel.” The man knelt, shaking. “If you don’t want to bleed to death right here, you’ll tell me how I can get out of the building if not through the kitchen.” The man swallowed, and Ferret pushed the knife harder against his throat. “You have three seconds.”

“Down to the end. The door on your left. It comes out under the main stairs. The front door is straight across.”

“Guards?”

“Most are asleep. Two will be in the front hall.”

“Thank you.” Ferret touched the man on the back of the neck and he collapsed unconscious, conveniently blocking the door.

“Have you killed him?” asked a small girl in a whisper.

“No, just made him sleep. Quickly and quietly now. Come on.” Ferret grabbed the girl’s hand and moved down the corridor with her little troop following, holding hands in a chain. When she reached the door, she closed her eyes, put her free hand on the wood, and concentrated. All this finding was giving her one hell of a headache, and she felt like she could sleep for a month. She shook her head and tried again. The man had been truthful. Two people were in the front hall.

“Girls, when we get through this door, you must be very, very quiet. It will be light enough to see. There are two men in there who’ll want to stop us. When I tell you to run, you must run to the big door and go outside as quickly as you can.” She glanced at the seven girls and pulled forward one who looked to be in her teens. “You’re the biggest. You go first and open the door for the rest, understand?” The girl just stared. Ferret could feel the sweat and fear through the girl’s hand. She put her hand on the girl’s cheek and pushed a tiny bit of energy into her. “You can do it; I know you can.” The girl nodded.

Ferret opened the door quietly and stepped into the front hall shielded by the large staircase, the girls following. She let go of their hands, took her short bow from her back, and nocked an arrow. She turned and faced the girls, making sure they were all watching her and were ready. Ferret was not a cold-blooded killer. She had killed the men charging at the king, but this was different; she was about to kill two men who were standing doing nothing. She took a deep breath, stepped out, and fired once and then once again.

“When the cat’s away the mice get pissed,” muttered Terran to himself as he and Sovan peeked through the window of the small wooden guard shed. Inside, two guards were slumped over a table sound asleep, two empty bottles of whiskey lying between them. He nodded to Sovan and they crept to the front of the shed and slipped inside.

“Now, you keep sleeping lads,” he said casually as one of the guards stirred.

“What?” The man tried to raise his head which was his last action in life. The second man never woke up to find out what his was. It was a bit brutal, even for the hardened knights, but they did not have the time to play nice.

“Two more bottles over here and some lamp oil,” said Sovan.

“That will do it.”

They splashed the oil and whiskey around liberally, then smashed the already lit lamp and legged it back out of the door, around the back of the shed, and across to where Garron was waiting.

“Anything?” asked Terran.

“Nothing out of the door, but a group of guards just came from the far side of the building; you can only just see it from here.”

Terran peered through the darkness. “You must have better eyesight than me.”

“Ten years younger, old man. Your fire seems to have caught hold. Nice.”

The flames flickered through the windows of the guard shed and someone shouted from farther up the drive. Four guards came running down the road calling for their comrades inside.

“Damn! They’ve reacted a bit too fast,” said Sovan. With a loud bang, the door of the guardhouse blew off its hinges and the flames billowed out. “Oh, shit! What did they have stored in there?”

Five more guards appeared from the far end of the house and ran towards the shed.

“What’s going on?” one of them shouted with the voice of authority. “Which of you stupid idiots are responsible for this?”

“Oh, gods, I hope Ferret doesn’t come out this way!” growled Terran.

“Run!” shouted Ferret to the girls as the second guard hit the floor with a scream of pain. Her first arrow had taken one guard in the throat, but her second had caught the other guard in the chest, and he had been able to call out a warning. “Go, now!” she yelled at the frightened girls. The older girl startled herself into action, grabbed the hand of one of the smaller girls, and ran across the hall followed by the others. Ferret ran out wide, nocking another arrow and looked up the stairs.

“Oi!” shouted a guard from above. She shot blindly and heard someone leap back.

“Someone has a bow down there!”

“Outside!” she snapped at the girls, who had instinctively turned at the voice.

The older girl yanked the door open and shooed the girls through as two guards ran down the stairs with swords drawn. Ferret loosed an arrow and hit one guard high in the leg, then drew her sword and charged into the second. The man was bigger than her, and he quickly put his sword up defensively. Ferret struck at him left and right quickly with her short sword, pushing him back against the steps, then pulled her knife and stabbed up underneath and into his stomach. The man gasped in pain and fell backwards.

“Get her!”

Two more guards appeared up at the top of the grand stairs. Ferret turned and fled to the front door, pushing the older girl in front of her. Outside, it was madness.

“Here they come!” shouted Garron. The small group of frightened girls piled out of the front door of the house into the half-light of early dawn as two more guards came charging around from the side of the building. Garron let fly with an arrow from his longbow, knocking one guard onto his back, and Sovan and Terran charged out from the trees with their longswords held in front of them. The girls skidded to a halt on the stone path, fear in their eyes, and immediately clumped together like sheep.

“This way!” Sovan called to them. “We are friends!”

“Go to him!” shouted Ferret, flying out of the front door, and pushing the older girl in front of her. She grabbed more arrows out of her quiver and nocked one on her short bow. “Go! Run!” The older girl ran to the others, grabbed two by the hands and dragged them over to where Sovan and Terran waited, circling back-to-back. Garron marched out from the wood, still shooting.

“There are too many!” shouted Terran.

“Take them into the woods!” called Ferret, shooting a guard who had come running out of the house.

Sovan stood in front of the girls, the huge man guarding them like a mother bear defending her cubs as another three guards came running down the drive, nearly blocking their escape. The girls were sobbing and shaking. Ferret ran to them and Garron joined them. The guards had spread out and were circling the group, wary of the deadly arrows from Garron and Ferret. The four stood around the girls, protecting them as the guards moved closer, Ferret and Garron still shooting, but with less effect since the guards were now watching where they were aiming.

“A monster!” screamed one of the girls.

With a roar, the great, angry form of Mab-Abin dived into the back of the guards, smashing two into the ground. He had spears in his hands and death in his eyes. Ferret quickly shot at two of the distracted guards.

“What the hell?” shouted Terran. “Garron, shoot it!”

“No!” cried Ferret, and knocked the archer’s bow to one side. “Shoot the guards!”

Without waiting, Ferret ran over to the dragon and scrambled up onto his back. The guards were scattering around him without any idea of what to do with this terrifying beast. “Terran! Get the girls out of here now!” Terran was frozen in shock.

“Move, knight!” roared Mab-Abin.

Terran growled in anger and grabbed Sovan. “Get them moving. Garron, follow us!”

“Right behind you!” Garron had recovered fastest and was shooting at the guards again.

“Now, Mab-Abin,” said Ferret.

“About time!”

The big Dragon jumped into the air, and they rained down arrows and spears onto the fleeing guards while the three men and the girls vanished into the trees.

The knights scrambled through the woods with the girls, running as fast as they could. None of the girls were wearing shoes, and each of the big men picked up two girls while the eldest girl ran on her own, tears flooding down her face from fear and pain. Behind them, they could hear the roar of the dragon as he and Ferret battled against the remaining few guards, and then silence followed by a rush of air overhead. The men and the girls burst out from the trees onto the road and ran up to where they had hidden their horses. The beast was waiting for them, and Ferret was pulling the canvas from the wagon.

“Get in,” she said urgently to the girls. All seven had ground to a halt and were staring at the dragon. “You!” Ferret pointed to the eldest girl. “What is your name? Quickly, girl!”

“Anna! It’s Anna, miss.”

“Anna, meet Mab-Abin. He is a desert dragon and a beautiful friend. Isn’t that right, dragon boy?”

“Of course it is, rider!” said the dragon, laughing.

“Now, Anna, get your sisters into the wagon quickly, please.”

The young girl nodded and shooed the younger girls into the wagon.

“Sir Terran,” said Mab-Abin sharply. “I trust I don’t have to be silly for you too?” The knight looked angry and confused. “We have not stopped all the guards; you must get this wagon up the road now.”

Ferret found her longbow and quiver, hugged Anna and ran to talk to the carthorses.

“I’m Garron, Sir Dragon,” said the archer, walking forward. “My apologies, but I nearly shot you.”

“Can we talk about this later, Garron?” said Mab-Abin in obvious annoyance.

Garron smiled in surprise. "Fair enough."

Ferret patted the archer on the shoulder as she walked back to Mab-Abin. "At least someone has working brains here. Everyone else, get up the road now. The horses will gallop for as long as they can, but when they slow, let them." She jumped up onto the dragon's back. "We'll watch your backs. Now, please. Go!" The dragon turned and leapt high into the air and soared up and over the woods.

Sir Sovan climbed up onto the driving seat and folded the canvas down. "Girls, sorry, this might be frightening. We need to gallop very fast. Please, stay flat down on the bed of the wagon. You understand?" Seven little heads nodded, and he smiled. "Good girls; all of you." Sovan slowly turned the cart around and looked at the back of the four big carthorses. "I have no idea what she said to you, but, giddy up!" The big horses moved off slowly at first then dug their hooves in and powered up the hill, followed by Garron and Terran on their mounts.

"Can you see them?" shouted Ferret to Mab-Abin.

"Not a thing."

"They must have their horses here somewhere!"

"There!" shouted back the dragon. "Under those trees. I can't get to them."

"Don't. Just shake the branches or something. It will scare them."

"Well, try anything once."

The Draig yr Anialr crashed down onto the top of the biggest tree, and, flapping his wings for stability, shook and roared as much as he could. Below, the horses were panicking, crashing around, whinnying and snorting. Then they heard wood breaking and the horses charged out from the trees and galloped off down the road away from the hunting lodge.

"Damn!"

"What?" shouted Ferret.

"Someone is shooting arrows. Nearly got me!" Mab-Abin lifted into the air.

"Oh, he has got you!"

"What?"

"Well, your pack!" Ferret chuckled in relief, pulling the arrow from the canvas bag.

"Not funny, dragon girl!"

"Sorry. Come on, we can't do any more here."

Mab-Abin flapped into the sky up above the clouds and bathed himself in the cold, dawn sunlight, the silence drifting around them as he caught a light breeze and glided into the wind.

"Are you alright?" asked Ferret.

"Yeah, and I am sorry."

"What for?"

"I couldn't hold back. I know you weren't ready for this yet, but you were in too much danger."

Ferret leant forward and put the side of her face on his neck. "You did the right thing, as you always do, darling Abin. Now, we need to see who is left down there and make sure they give chase in the wrong direction."

"Hold on, rider." The dragon snapped his wings in and dived through the clouds, hunting any guards that may have rescued horses.

The big carthorses galloped till they were nearly at the top of the pass and then slowed suddenly from a gallop to a walk, panting and exhausted. Sovan pulled them to a halt.

“Any sign?” he called to Sir Terran, who rode up behind.

“Nothing.”

“These girls are frozen,” said Sovan. “Help me get the bows up and the canvas put up properly while the horses rest.”

Knowing they were bringing young passengers, they had packed a full-sized bonnet in the wagon and extra blankets. The three men slotted the bows into position and pulled the bonnet up and over the top, while the girls waited on the road, Anna helping them to wrap up in the blankets.

“Please, sir,” she said to Sir Terran as he climbed down and dropped the tailgate. “Who is that lady? Will we see her again?”

“Probably, girl,” he said. “And I am sorry she frightened you.”

“No sir. She saved me. She saved us all. We want to thank her, sir, and her dragon.”

The knight looked up into the sky. “So do I.”

The king’s expression of relief and joy when the wagon appeared over the pass turned to worry when he realised Ferret was missing. His troops had made a good camp, and they now ran up to meet the wagon and help the shivering and frightened girls.

“Where is she?” Hornan ran up and grabbed Sir Terran as he climbed off his horse. “Where is Eiferra?” The knight took his old friend by the shoulders and turned him around. There, farther down the road, standing straight and proud, was the first dragon any humans in Preland had seen in five hundred years.

Mab-Abin raised himself up onto his great legs, spread his wings wide and roared. As the king watched in amazement, the desert dragon bowed low, revealing his rider standing on his back, smiling. Then, with a mischievous glint in his eyes, Mab-Abin leapt into the sky, circled once, and vanished into the clouds.

Chapter 10 – Coming of Age

“You are going to get yourself into so much trouble one day, young girl!”

“Oh, Hilda! Don’t creep up. I nearly had a heart attack!” Silvi was sitting on the back step of the inn in the snow fighting with her riding boots.

The landlady of The White Pony in Ressen village chuckled. “Well, you be the one disappearing upstairs all the time!”

“I’m not that bad. I think my boots have shrunk.”

“I am not complaining, Silvi, just saying. So, what am I going to do with your newest then?”

“She’s still asleep. Give her some breakfast? Tell her I was a bad dream or something?”

“Are you planning on seeing her again?”

“She is getting a bit lamblike, Hilda.”

“What, like her cousin last month?”

“Hilda, not my fault! I had no idea till you told me.” Silvi finished fighting with her boot and gave the woman a hug. “I’m going to be busy for a while anyway, so with any luck she will forget me and cuddle up to some poor unsuspecting boy somewhere.”

Hilda brushed a stray blonde hair from the girl’s face. “You be careful out there, young one. I know the risks you are taking, and I have seen the blood on your leathers far too often now. You have become part of our family here. I don’t want to be hearing I have lost you. That would be hard.”

“I know I mess around, Hilda, but I like it here, and I know you all watch out for me.” Silvi gave the woman a kiss on the cheek then shouted for Horse to wake up.

“Are you ever going to give that poor animal a proper name?”

“He has a proper name. Family tradition going back hundreds of years!” Silvi leapt up on the animal bareback and looked up at the falling snow. “I don’t suppose you can cook up some summer in your kitchen?”

“What sort of a cook do you think I am?”

“A very warm and cuddly one!” Silvi gave Horse a nudge and trotted up the lane before her latest little conquest woke up and became any more doe-eyed.

For the last few months her life had been split into four unequal parts. She, Tellor, and Deffane had recruited forty potential longbow archers and had been training them hard as quickly as possible. When not training, the three of them and those that were ready had been running off on missions all over the moors, rooting out camps of raiders. It had been mostly thugs and thieves, but some trained soldiers too, and they were adding to the problems in the area. Eliminating them had been dangerous and bloody, but was giving the archers vital experience and pleasing Sir Hal and the locals. Then, whenever possible, Silvi had been meeting Be-Elin in the clearing to compare notes with the dragon’s own scouting missions. And finally, she had been spending every possible moment staying over at the White Pony. She blamed her

nocturnal activities on the influence of Be-Elin, who was, as far as Silvi could determine, the naughtiest desert dragon ever. Though this was from a sample of one, to be fair.

“You’re near to being late, girl,” said Deffane, walking across the inner ward with a big mug of steaming coffee.

“You have to be kind to me today, Deffane. You promised!”

“Don’t see why. Going by what Horan said when he got back from the Pony last night, you were already celebrating.”

“Are you spying on me?”

“Of course. How would I know what insults to throw at you unless I kept up with the gossip? Oh, Sir Hal is riding in today. He’ll be upset if he’s not included.”

“He said last week. Why is my birthday so important to everyone?”

“We have bets on whether you will make the next one or not. Any husbands chasing after you?”

“Strictly unmarried, Deffane, like me.”

“Well, since you are all eager, wake up those five new recruits Tellor hauled in last night. Get them assessed and let me know what they need.”

“Yes, sir!” Silvi saluted and nudged Horse through the arch and into the stables, stifling a yawn. Of course, this was the other reason she was at the tavern so much; their living accommodation. So far, despite her efforts, she was the only girl in the loft above the stables, and there was a limit to how much male snoring and farting she could handle. Hilda had done Silvi an enormous favour by letting her take over the smallest room at Pony while it was quiet.

“Morning, Silvi.”

“Morning, Jen. Want to saddle up Horse?”

“Which saddle?”

“The warm, comfy one. I’m just going to take the recruits over to the fields.”

“Coffee is on upstairs. Recruits are on the first five pallets on the left. Still asleep five minutes ago.”

“Have you been up stealing our coffee again?” Officially, the loft was off limits to everyone who was not in Deffane’s special squad, but Jen, the fifteen-year-old daughter of the cook, flouted the rules outrageously.

“I don’t know where Tellor gets his coffee, but it is better than we have in the kitchen. Will you be long?”

“Ten minutes. The recruits are going to be on foot.”

“Yes, Ma’am!” The girl patted the big horse on the rump and sent him over to the large red-tiled shelter next to the forge where the farrier shod the horses, and brushed him down.

Now to wake up some unsuspecting recruits. Silvi trotted up the stairs, poured coffee into a beaten pewter mug and walked into the long loft where most of her troop were still sleeping.

“You five!” She kicked the ends of the pallets. “Up, dressed, and in the stable yard in five minutes. Bows ready but unstrung. Go!” She waited ten seconds. “Now!” The recruits scrambled up from their pallets while Silvi walked down to the far end where her own, rarely used pallet was.

“Get much sleep?”

“Morning to you too, Tellor. Yes, it wasn’t as mad as everyone seems to think.”

“Happy Birthday, girl.”

“Thank you, old man.” Silvi took off her riding jacket, changed her shirt for a fresh one and put the jacket back on. “I’m going to take the five down to the long fields. Start them with a bit of a run. Anything I should be looking out for?”

“All of them can shoot with a short bow and two of them were getting the idea of the longbow relatively quickly. They are all trying to draw too fast, and we are going to get strained wrists.”

“I did that!” said Silvi happily, remembering her disastrous first attempts up at Ponack. She was desperate to get away for a few days so she could have a week of sleep up at her little rider’s house. It was nice cuddling up with friends at the Pony, but she just never seemed to stop with training, scouting, running, everything. Be-Elin had fared no better, and had been scouting all the Kingdom’s neighbours with some worrying results, but they had yet to find a way to pass the information on to Sir Hal for the king.

“I never did my wrist, but I managed to break my nose on my first try,” said Tellor.

“How the hell did you do that?”

“I am not very sure. I just pulled it back really hard and the next thing I knew it had smacked me in the face.”

“No hope for you, you know that?”

“As you keep saying. So, do any of your young friends have frustrated big sisters or aunts or anything?”

“Are you getting lonely?”

“Surrounded by this smelly bunch? What do you reckon?”

Silvi looked down the line of waking, grunting men along the one side of the loft. Eventually, they would hopefully fill both sides, but for the moment, it still looked a bit empty.

“You have a point. I will ask around. Now, I better see if any of your strapping young men can keep up with a pathetic little girl!”

The recruits were lined up in the gently falling snow when Silvi trotted down the stairs and collected Horse from where he was warming himself by the forge.

“Thanks, Jen,” she called out, and heard some muffled reply from the tack room. “This morning, gentlemen, I will be assessing two things. I want to see what your general fitness is, and then I will be testing you on your bowmanship. I know Tellor has already tested you, but my job is to find out exactly where your weaknesses are so we can give you the right training and pair you up with more experienced archers. This is not about failure or success this morning. However, if I feel you are not trying hard enough, I will shout at you. You will be on foot, so follow me.” Silvi didn’t wait for any sort of answer and headed off at a good trot through to the inner ward and out of the gate of Levin Burh, the five men breaking into a run to keep up.

She had quickly found out that being female, young, and short, all counted against her in this male-dominated world of the burh. That she could now outshoot anyone and could disarm practically any of the soldiers in the irregulars had given her a useful reputation, but hadn’t helped with her authority. The problem was that however hard she tried she just did not sound like Sergeant Deffane. The man’s voice could rupture the walls of the castle, according to Sir Hal, and he loved to have face-to-face arguments with any willing recruit; arguments he always won. Silvi had neither the height nor the voice to compete. In the end, she found she had better success if she spoke normally, then just walked away quickly. If anyone wanted to argue, they

had to run after her first which made them look idiotic and put them at a disadvantage. Deffane had done exactly that to her when she had first tried to enlist.

Silvi sat on an old tree stump watching the five recruits take aim at the three targets that she and Tellor had set up at various intervals down the length of the long fields. Each was carefully measured out, and their expectation of success depended on distance. Everyone should be able to hit the nearest target, and if they couldn't after an hour of getting used to the wind and the longbows, they had no business in the squad. They expected one in five to be able to hit the second, even if they were inexperienced with the longbow, which applied to nearly all recruits, and they did not expect any to hit the third. However, the archers should be getting close to the right distance even if they were off target. The five recruits had now been shooting for about an hour following their run, and they were all more or less getting the hang of the bow, but they were struggling with the distance.

"You are still drawing the bow far too fast," shouted Silvi to the tall man who was taking his turn.

"But then how do you loose arrows quickly?" he asked, quite reasonably.

"You don't. Very few can shoot that rapidly if for no other reason your arm would feel like lead very quickly if you tried. You will speed up a bit when you get better, but not a lot. The advantage of the longbow is distance and power. If you want speed, I suggest you hurl rocks at your enemy instead."

The tall man drew again, and she stopped him once more. "Do exactly as I do," she said, jumping off the stump and taking her bow from her back. "In fact, you can all lineup and do this. Just imitate my speed and don't try to race me."

Silvi nocked an arrow while pointing it at the ground, then very slowly lifted the bow and at the same time drew back the string. The action was far slower than normal, but she wanted them to feel the power of their bow at every stage, even if it became uncomfortable. At last, the string reached the back of her jaw, and she held the position, leaning slightly forward, frozen like a statue.

"Now I will adjust my aim. Choose whichever target you wish. I'm not interested in accuracy; I want you to understand the power of the bow. When you are ready, and not before, loose your arrow."

All the recruits were using longbows from the armoury. They were not as heavy as Silvi's bow or the one they would be issued once trained, but they were still a good eighty pounds draw, and after an hour of shooting, they were getting tired. One by one they let their arrows fly, each of them sighting down the shaft at the middle target. Finally, Silvi loosed her own arrow and turned to the recruits.

"You all missed the target, but you had the right distance and were more controlled. That is good. When you are more experienced, I expect that you will not sight down the arrow with one eye closed, but will use both eyes and look at the target itself. Now, go and collect all the arrows and we will return to the burh. If someone can fetch my arrow for me, I have the luxury of being lazy."

"Where is yours?" asked the youngest recruit.

"In the fourth target."

"Fourth?"

"You'll find it."

When the young man returned he was grinning, despite the light snow that had started to fall again.

"Where was it?" asked the tall man.

"There is another target fifty paces past the third, but it is half the size. You can hardly see it from here."

"She hit it?"

"Oh, yeah. Right in the middle!"

Silvi smiled as she climbed up on Horse. It had taken her and Tellor two weeks of practice and experimentation to be able to hit that farthest target. It was a trick, really; you aimed not at the target but at a particular branch right at the top of the tree it was nailed too. As long as there was no wind, you would hit it.

"I will take your bows for you. Fast run back to the keep, then get your lunch from the kitchens. I want you to report to the fletcher this afternoon. We need more arrows made, and you have to learn to make them how we like them." Silvi relieved them of their bows, thanked them briefly, and galloped back to the keep.

"You're late," called out Sir Hal, the king's younger brother, as she rode into the inner ward.

"Why does everyone keep saying that? Why not hello? Or nice to see you, Silvi? Or Lovely weather, or something?"

"Because you are late?"

"That is just picky, Sir Knight."

"Well, picky or not, you're expected in the great hall in five minutes." The big, fair haired man turned on his heel and paced over to the kitchen, yelling something about beer.

"Oh, yes, that thing," said Silvi to herself. For some reason, everyone wanted to celebrate her birthday when mostly such things were happily ignored around the burh. Of course, she suspected it was at least partly her fault because she had kept mentioning it. The problem was, they all thought she was twenty-three, well twenty-four now, but really this was her eighteenth, and on the Isle of Hope that was an important number; it was her coming of age. Jen was waiting for her when Horse walked casually into the stable yard, snorting at the falling snow.

"I'll sort Horse out," said Jen. "Sir Hal is going to complain if you are much later."

"I was working, you know."

"I know, but what's the point of being the king's brother if you can't be unreasonably impatient?"

"You are too good for this place, Jen, do you know that?"

The girl did a mock curtsy. "Well thank you, Lady Silvi!"

Silvi laughed, handed over the reins, then trotted up to the loft to stow the recruit's bows before heading to the great hall.

Levin Burh was an old, practical keep, and the great hall was named because it was the biggest and not the most beautiful or splendid of the two halls. Silvi had spent almost no time in the great hall. Since she had been there, she had either eaten at the Pony, on the hoof, or in the small hall next to the kitchens, and she had almost forgotten how big it was. When she entered, a group of her friends stood up from the long table they had commandeered by the fire at the far end of the hall. Having Sir Hal at the head of the table afforded them some privileges.

"All of you?" Silvi grimaced. All was not a huge number, but it included Tellor, Deffane, Sergeant Mennon, Horan, a couple of the better archers, one of the kitchen maids, and Jen who came trotting in past her and ran over to join the others.

"Sorry, I had to stable Horse."

Sir Hal walked to the front of the little group and waited for Silvi, who slowed to a halt looking embarrassed. "I wanted to be here for a couple of reasons," he said to her, making sure everyone could hear. "Three months down the line, I wanted to thank you, Tellor, and Deffane personally for taking an impossible situation and turning it around. I know the three of you have felt close to giving up at times, but you are now finding recruits, your training is superb, and I am far closer to getting the company of longbow archers than I thought I would be before you walked in through my gate and decided to massacre one of my fir trees."

The chuckle from Tellor was matched by a cough of embarrassment from Deffane who had so spectacularly misjudged the girl and tried to send away the best archer in the keep.

"But the other reason to be here is because it's your birthday," Sir Hal said. "Now, if I remember rightly from when you joined up, this is your twenty-fourth birthday. But a couple of the wiser members of my staff have suspected that whatever birthday this really is, it is important to you. Silvi Goatherd, you are certainly the most unusual of my soldiers. You have a temper to match Deffane's, which is quite an accomplishment, you are probably the most talked about person here, which is annoying as I thought that should be me, and you have collected the most unlikely assortment of fathers and big brothers who care for you an awful lot." The knight smiled in a kindly way, but then his expression turned more serious. "But you are also one of the best soldiers we have here. The recruits look up to you, you can outshoot anyone, and you have even put Mennon on his back twice which has made you popular with Deffane. More importantly, when you have been out on patrol, Deffane tells me you are a very different person. You take orders without a second thought, you fight hard, you have a quick mind, are decisive, and you work with the others around you on equal terms. That is exactly what we needed in the company. I am lucky that I have you, Tellor and your recruits, all of whom are proving their worth and starting to make a difference to the lives of the villagers around here. So, happy birthday, Silvi, and you have my thanks and my wishes. Would you like a beer now?"

"Oh, yes please!" Silvi was almost speechless with embarrassment and gratefully took the beer proffered by Sir Hal. She joined the others around the table for an afternoon away from the snow, the training, and the patrols. And away too from the trouble brewing over the border about which Silvi feared that Sir Hal knew nothing. As the afternoon wore on, Silvi's thoughts drifted to the one person she wished to be with more than any other today, and while it was still light, she made her excuses and slipped away to trot up to the hidden clearing in the forest.

Horan was sitting next to Tellor when Silvi quietly thanked Sir Hal, and he looked up and watched her as she left the hall with a thoughtful look on her face. Since her run in with his brother Jon at the Pony, he had asked to move from the irregulars to the archers. It was partly because he was not a bad archer and was interested in learning the longbow, but also, he had wanted to put distance between himself and his brother. For the last month, the two had hardly spoken a word. Silvi had become a good friend in the meantime, and if he was honest, he held a small candle for the young woman, though he knew she had no interest in him at all other than friendship. He couldn't help it, however, and he often found himself looking out for her. When he saw his brother and a small group of friends who were sitting by the door of the great hall leave and follow Silvi, a scowl on his brother's face, he began to worry.

"Do you know where Silvi has gone?" he asked Tellor, who was pouring himself a beer. "She looked very thoughtful."

"Why?"

"Just, I don't know."

"What is it son?" Deffane asked him.

“Sorry, sergeant. I just saw Silvi leave, and my brother was watching her. He didn’t look happy.”

“Is that still a problem?”

“I think so. I haven’t spoken to him in a month. To be honest, I’ve been avoiding him.”

“Are you talking about Jon?” Sergeant Mennon leant over the table. “I am sorry, Horan, but I’m close to kicking him out. He’s becoming trouble.”

“So, where is your brother now?” asked Deffane.

“Well, that’s just it. I saw him and his friends leave. They were sitting by the door.”

Deffane looked over to their table. “They have left their beer unfinished. That’s unusual. Do you think they might be following her?”

“I don’t know. But if he is still angry at her, then that was one hell of a speech Sir Hal gave.”

“What about my speech?” Sir Hal had been talking to the cook who had come to join them.

“Horan here is worried about Silvi,” explained Deffane to the knight. “Says his brother Jon and his friends left just after her. They haven’t even finished their beer.”

“Do we know where she has gone?” asked Sir Hal. “She said she was feeling tired and wanted some peace and quiet, though she didn’t look tired.”

“I know where she might have gone,” said Tellor.

“Where is that?” Deffane asked the archer.

Tellor looked a bit guilty. “She sometimes needs to get away from everything. I know you were joking about her age, Sir Hal, but actually, she is only young. She has a place up in the woods, a clearing, where she goes and hides sometimes. I saw her go up there once when I was rabbit hunting and asked her about it. She just said it was a nice quiet place that no one else knew about, so I said I wouldn’t say anything.”

“Can you find this place again?” asked Deffane.

“Pretty sure I can.”

“Sir?” Deffane turned to the knight.

“Go on then,” said Sir Hal. “If it is nothing, then you can all blame Tellor here for giving her secret away.” Deffane, Tellor, and Horan stood to leave. “Wait a minute, sergeant, I am coming too. You’ve got me worried now.” He smiled grimly and left to find his greatcoat and sword.

The snow was not falling heavily, and though it was settling in the open, it had yet to make it through the thick canopy of fir and spruce onto the narrow path that wound from the back of the burh and up the hill to the small clearing. Silvi was suffering from mixed feelings about the genuine warmth that had been shown her by all her friends and the king’s brother. She had lied about her age and even about her name, not to mention omitting to say what species of person her best friend was. And yet they had shown her unconditional support and kindness. She knew Tellor was suspicious of her, but for whatever reason had kept what he thought to himself, and had often proved to be a brother to her when she had felt out of her depth.

Now, her troubles were worsening. A week before, Be-Elin had told her of a large organised camp of soldiers in Calon. It looked like a permanent camp rather than a battalion on the move, but it had worried the dragon. Until now, all military activity from Calon and its neighbour Tulinor had been bandit style raids, often with small gangs of mercenaries that Silvi had helped fight, but this spoke of organisation and discipline they had not seen before. Be-Elin, once paired with General Farthing, had judged the camp from her own experience as extremely

dangerous. The problem for Silvi was this camp was thirty leagues from the border and in an isolated part of the countryside. How on Dirt was she to explain how she knew about it?

The clearing, as Be-Elin described it, was perfect for one small cheeky rider and one frustrated dragon. It was also cold, damp, and getting snowed on. Just to the left of the clearing, they had found a partly broken down old fir tree. With a bit of expert leaning from the big desert dragon, they had brought the rest of the tree down and had created a small hidey-hole for messages, and even a shelter for Silvi if she was caught in the rain. The girl trotted through the snow to the tree, took off her bow and fished around inside. Nothing. Well, it was not totally unexpected since she was hoping to see the lady herself and not one of her badly written notes; Be-Elin and writing had an uneasy relationship.

Snow has an annoying quality. It deadens sound, and though it might have a soft crunch when walked on, it does bury all those noisy twigs and leaves. Couple that with being deep in thought and Silvi was taken completely by surprise by the four men.

"Hold her!" shouted Jon as they knocked her forwards to the ground, one of the men landing heavily on her back. Silvi gasped in pain, the breath knocked from her. "Roll her over!" Silvi was wrestled onto her back, three soldiers holding her down, and Jon, Horan's brother, standing over her grinning.

"Get off me!" Silvi pulled and twisted trying to get free, but she was held tightly.

"So, Miss Goatherd. About time you and I had a chat." The big man dropped to his knees, pinning her legs down and making her grimace in pain. "Oh, didn't you like that? I thought you liked a bit of wrestling." He pulled out a long fighting knife and let the tip fall on her riding jacket. "Oh, I forgot. You only like wrestling little girls."

"Let me up, you coward!"

"No, I don't think so. You see, I think it's lesson time. We have heard all these little stories about you. How you go wriggling your little blonde head down at the Pony and picking up all these cutie farm girls. Well, see, we think that is all a bit peculiar. We believe there is something wrong with you, and reckon we need to cure you! What do you say? You need curing?"

"Piss off!"

"Tsk! Language. What about you, Kin, think she needs curing?"

"Like to try mate," said the man holding her left arm, chuckling.

"Yeah, I will give it a go," said one of the other men, grabbing her breast which made her growl and the other's laugh.

"You see, Silvi darling, all these kind gentlemen, all volunteering to help you. What do you say to that?" Silvi's eyes were wide, and she spat at him. "Oh, very sweet!" Jon leant forward and slit her riding jacket open violently with his knife, cutting her belly in the process. "Oops! You probably want to lie still, girl!" He laughed and then hacked at the jacket, cutting most of it away. Silvi shivered. Her riding leathers were lined and warm, and she only needed to wear a thin shirt underneath. She tried to fight them off again, but Jon held the knife to her throat. "Hold her still, lads," he said, his voice dripping with malice. The two men either side of her pulled her arms out straight, twisting them till she yelped in agony. The third man pulled out her legs and sat on them.

"Got her Jon," said the man. "Help yourself. She owes you."

"Oh, doesn't she just!" Jon reached forward, grabbed the shirt by the collar and ripped it violently from her body, exposing her to the snow and the glares and laughter of the men.

"Hey, she's a little one!" said one of the men, giggling.

"Pretty, though!" said another. "Hurry up, Jon. I want some of that."

"You'll get plenty. Once I've finished with her." Jon ran his course hands roughly down her chest then slid backwards and lowered the point of his knife to her leather trousers. "Now, where do your little girlfriends like to start, eh?"

The screech of fury from above the trees turned into a nightmare. Be-Elin crashed down just feet away and roared. The four men fell back off Silvi in shock, and the girl rolled sideways, leapt to her feet, and let fly with the knife she kept on her belt. Jon ducked, and the knife flew passed him and buried itself in the chest of the man behind who had been holding Silvi's feet. Be-Elin, growling in anger, charged forward and butted Jon, knocking him backwards, and then pinned him to the ground with her huge foot, the talons gripping him hard around the chest. Jon gasped in agony.

"Move and I shoot!" yelled Silvi at the other two men as they staggered to their feet. She had grabbed her longbow from the ground and had two arrows nocked, the bow string pulled right back, and she was shaking with anger.

"Get off me, I can't breathe!" Be-Elin was slowly crushing Jon beneath her foot.

"Be-Elin, hold him, but keep him alive."

"Why?"

"I don't know." Silvi could feel tears running down her cheeks. "I said don't bloody move!" she screamed at the two men who were trying to back away. "Just hold him, Elin."

The desert dragon pulled one of her spears from her shoulder, held it against Jon's neck, and eased off the pressure from her foot. "Move an inch, and I will crush you. I promise." Her voice was cold, and the man kept very still. "Now what, girl?"

"They were bloody going to rape me!"

"I know. I saw. We are going to have to leave."

"I'm sorry; it has all gone wrong!" Silvi was holding the bowstring taught, and her arms were aching.

"It's not your fault!"

"You two!" shouted Silvi. "Backup and kneel down!" The two men moved back and fell to their knees, their hands held high above their heads. They watched nervously as Silvi moved her aim from one to the other. At this range with two arrows, whoever she hit would have their chest ripped apart.

"We need to go now," said Be-Elin.

"Silvi! Where are you? Shit!" Deffane came running into the clearing followed by Sir Hal, Horan, and Tellor. The four men skidded on the snow trying to make sense of the scene in front of them, and the dragon holding a spear to the neck of Horan's brother.

"Silvi, what is going on?" asked Sir Hal.

"You, knight!" growled Be-Elin. "Are these your men?"

The knight looked at the dragon in shock. "Yes, they are under my command."

Be-Elin leant forward. "They tried to rape my rider. My friend. Now, tell me why I shouldn't kill them?"

"Be-Elin!" cried Silvi. "They are friends, my friends. These are good people."

"Please, wait." Tellor carefully put down his sword and walked towards the dragon and bowed.

"What is this?" Be-Elin looked at the man in confusion.

"Please, my name is Tellor. Silvi is my friend. I am descended from families that came from the Eastern Planes. On my father's side, they were called Gellin and Feline."

The dragon blinked and looked at the archer, standing proudly in front of her. "Gellin? He was a dragon rider; a famous one." Be-Elin took a breath and stood back away from Jon, but kept the spear to his neck. "This man sat on top of her and exposed her," she said. "I should kill him for that, for what he intended to do. Take him." Tellor pulled his knife, dragged the big man to his feet, and sat him with the other two men next to the corpse of their friend. Sir Hal walked up to the girl and pushed her bow to the side gently.

"Let it go, Silvi," he commanded. "Let it go." Silvi threw the bow and the arrows to the ground and stared at her feet.

"Excuse me, sir," said Deffane, and pushed past the knight, wrapping his own coat around the girl. "Silvi, look at me." She raised her head. She was trying not to cry, but the sobs were pushing their way free in small gasps. "You need to come back to the castle."

"She goes nowhere without me!" snapped Be-Elin. "She is my rider. She is my best friend."

"Then you must come too," said Sir Hal. "My name is Sir Hal, I am the king's brother, and Silvi Goatherd is my friend too."

Be-Elin turned to the knight who was now staring up at her with confidence and authority.

"Knight, my name is Be-Elin. I am one of the Draig yr Anialr, the desert dragons. It is too cold for her to walk back. Rider, climb up."

The dragon dropped a wing and Silvi pulled herself up on the hides and lay down, putting her face on the warm skin of Be-Elin's neck. Without another word, the dragon leapt into the air and soared down to the keep.

Sir Hal turned slowly to Tellor, who was holding his knife against Jon's throat. "Did you know any of this?"

"No, sir. I recognised what she wore and her weapons because we have ancient family heirlooms, but I know almost nothing about my ancestors."

"Fine." The knight walked over to the three kneeling men. "Because of the man my brother is, you will stand trial. If I had my way, I would have let that dragon kill you. Do you understand?" He marched back towards the path. "Bring them. You can leave the dead one till morning."

Be-Elin landed in the inner ward with a crash. Her anger had lessened, but she was still far too close to dangerous.

"Who can help you, Silvi?" she asked the girl on her back.

"Jen. She will help. And her mother, the cook."

"Where is Jen?" shouted Be-Elin. "I have Silvi here who needs help." A group of soldiers piled into the ward holding bows, swords, and anything else they could find.

"Oh, bloody hell," muttered Silvi. She slid down carefully from the dragon. Her back was killing her from where they had knocked her down, and the cut on her stomach was bleeding through her fingers, enough to leave her feeling faint.

"Silvi?"

"Mennon, go find Jen and her mother. Hal is on his way. This is my friend, Be-Elin. She won't hurt you."

"You, boy," shouted Sergeant Mennon at a lad who was peeking around a doorway. "Go get Jen. She is probably in the loft. Rest of you, back off!" he shouted at the soldiers. Silvi started to wobble, and the sergeant rushed forward to grab her. "What happened?"

"Four of your men tried to rape her, soldier," growled Be-Elin. "And yes, I am furious about it!"

Silvi stayed the night with Jen and her mother while Be-Elin flew to the far side of the hills where she had built a dragon house as winter had approached. Come the dawn, Be-Elin returned and was sitting in the inner ward, still angry.

“Sir Hal, if you want to talk to Silvi, then you speak to me also,” she said to the knight who had come down to greet her. “We are a pairing. Against my better judgement, I let her join with you, and it was only by chance that I came to that clearing to celebrate her coming of age.”

“Coming of age? How old is she?”

“Eighteen. She is now a woman.” The dragon’s tone was abrupt, and she stared at the knight as if he was an idiot.

“Of course she is,” he muttered.

“Of course I am what?” Silvi emerged from the stables, dressed in her second set of leathers. She had dark rings under her eyes, her stomach was sore where the cook had stitched her wound, and she was limping because of her aching back. But her voice was strong once more, though with none of her usual humour.

“Young,” said the knight. “And you have a lot of questions to answer.” Sir Hal swore at himself quietly. “And I’m sorry. Are you alright?”

Silvi stiffened a little. “I will be. I am going for a short while, but we have to tell you something important first.”

“Speak.”

“No, not here. I will meet you at the long fields.” Silvi handed her bag to Be-Elin, climbed painfully up on her back, and knelt up on the hides. “We’ll be waiting.” The dragon leapt into the air and vanished over the walls.

“Do you want me to come with you, Sir Hal?” asked Deffane, walking from the kitchen.

“No, I think this is for me alone, sergeant. Get everyone up and back to business. I will want to see all the senior staff when I return.”

“Sir.”

When Sir Hal rode his warhorse into the long fields, Silvi had a good fire going, coffee simmering, and Be-Elin had pulled over a couple of large logs and placed them either side of the fire.

“This is how I lived some of the time before I arrived at the burh,” said Silvi to the knight as he dismounted from his horse. “Of course, less than a year ago, I was a cheese maker in a tiny cottage on the Isle of Hope.” She waved for him to sit down and poured him a pewter mug of coffee. “I hope you like it sweet.” The girl sounded bruised and bitter.

“I do; a failing of mine. Do you want to talk about what happened yesterday?”

“No. You can deal with those men, and I will go and deal with myself; away from this snow. Where I was brought up, snow was almost a myth. We never saw it, and we didn’t see winter either.”

“You can travel long distances on your dragon?”

“Lesson one, she is not my dragon. I am her rider, though we argue about that sometimes.”

“Silvi doesn’t think she deserves to be my rider, even though she has become far better than her great father ever was.”

“Great father?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know how many greats it is between her and him.” The dragon shrugged.

“My name is not Goatherd,” said Silvi, apologetically. “My real name is Silvi Farthing.” Hal whistled. “That name has history,” he commented.

“Johnson Farthing is Silvi’s ancestor,” Be-Elin explained. “General Farthing was my rider during the wars in The Prelates.”

Sir Hal nearly choked on his coffee. “How old are you?”

Be-Elin scowled. “I will forgive your rudeness in the circumstances, but I am over five hundred years old. Middle-aged before you make a thing of it.” Sir Hal turned to Silvi, who was smiling a little.

“Dragons and humans can be quite similar sometimes, Sir Hal.”

“Oh.” The knight raised an eyebrow. “Nice to see you smile again, Silvi.”

“I’ll be alright, thanks to my big friend.”

“I have a lot of questions.”

“I know, and they will have to wait. While I have been trying to be an archer, Be-Elin has been scouting for you.”

“You have?”

“I have, knight.”

“Please, Sir Hal, or Sir, or just Hal. But not knight.”

“Hal it is. Titles have no meaning to my people. Actions are more important.”

“You will get on well with my brother.”

“Be-Elin, Hal set aside his own title of prince. He understands.”

“Good. I have been keeping a watch on your neighbours, particularly when Silvi and the others have been patrolling. She is my rider, and I have a duty to protect her. But I have also been flying farther south. I can see long distances much better than humans can, and can fly high enough that I am unnoticed. I have found a camp of soldiers in Calon.”

“That’s not of any great surprise. They must be training their raiders somewhere.”

“Hal, I spent two years fighting with General Farthing, and we dragons became expert at telling one camp from another, judging numbers, and how well organised they were. This camp is highly organised, very well hidden thirty leagues from your border, and probably has at least two thousand soldiers, but it looks like it is being prepared for many more.”

Sir Hal sat straight. “You are sure?”

“Very. I spent many missions spying on both Heinela Cwendrin and the Haftens. These are more like Haftens, but of one thing I am certain, they are not just raiders or bandits, they are being trained.”

“Where is it?” asked Sir Hal.

“I have marked it on this map,” said Silvi. “It looks like a permanent camp, Be-Elin says, and they are not moving. However, I can think of no other reason for them to have such an army than to attack Hertenesse. Am I wrong?”

“No, you are not wrong. Their other neighbours are either of no interest to them or allied to them. We are their only near enemy.”

“That is what we thought. Sir Hal, we have only known this for a week, and I have been tearing my hair out trying to find a way to tell you, so perhaps those bastards have done me a favour.”

“No, they haven’t, Silvi. Yes, I wish you had told me a week ago, but no, not like this. I meant what I said in that speech. You really have become my best soldier, despite being by far my youngest!”

“You told him?” Silvi glared at Be-Elin. “When are you going to learn to lie?”

“Sorry!”

“I know you say I cannot ask questions,” said Sir Hal. “But is there anything else I should be aware of?”

“I can’t tell you anything else because I do not know myself yet,” said Silvi. “That is part of why I need to leave for a while. I’m not sure for how long, but I will be coming back, I promise, and I will have answers. I’m not abandoning you.” The young woman stood and held out her hand to the knight, who took it firmly. “I’m sorry if I sound mysterious, and I am not comfortable with that. Whatever Calon is planning, we are certain they are months from being ready yet.”

“There are many soldiers there, but it’s obvious they are still training and recruiting,” added Be-Elin. “You need to prepare, but they are not coming tomorrow.”

Silvi walked over to the dragon and climbed on her back. “Can you thank the others for me? Tell them I am sorry I have not thanked them myself. I know I should have done.”

“They will understand,” said Hal. “Have you any idea how long you will be?”

“I just need some time to think. When we return, we will want to see your big brother.” She grinned cheekily, a little of herself returning as she contemplated spending time with the beautiful dragon.

“I think he will be very upset if you don’t, Silvi!” shouted the knight as Be-Elin stepped away from the fire and leapt into the air.

Sir Hal sat back down on the log and poured himself another mug of coffee. When he returned to the burh, his life would be turned on its head, beginning with sending scouts deep into Calon to find out more about this camp. But for the moment, sitting next to a warm fire in the archery training field, he felt he was in the last peaceful place on Dirt. The least he could do was to finish the pot of coffee left as a parting gift by two incredible people.

“You’re spending more time there than here now, girl.”

“It was my home, to be fair. This is my home now, but everything we need to know is over there. Anyway, I can’t exactly hide that bloody big dragon, so I am back in a wagon or on a horse.”

“Did I waste all those years? I would throttle that bloody woman if she was not dead already. She used me and that flaming oath!”

“I think she was right.”

“Are you supporting her now? You were furious when you found out about Rusty!”

“I know. But Rusty didn’t know; it wasn’t her fault.”

“So why wasn’t it a waste?”

“Tekkinmod and Henry had to be stopped, but it wasn’t the moment to put everything right. Even without the disease, the dragons were in decline and cutting themselves off from humans. The Cwendrina’s role only works if everyone is in place. You did the right thing.”

“You are getting wiser, girl.”

“No, not wiser. I just now know more than I did before. There have been some almighty screw-ups, though. Sen-Liana left a legacy that is just wrong. I am going to have to correct that at some point. I haven’t even found a way of getting the dragons back yet.”

“And the disease?”

“The little annoying dragon says it’s changing.”

“Are you still arguing with him? He is just getting old.”

“You are even older.”

“I love you too.”

Chapter 11 – A Little Truth

“Abin, I can’t walk up to him and say, oh, by the way, King, I am older than you, but only by four hundred and eighty years, or something.”

“You have to!”

“Why?”

“Because you are, you daft fool! They already know you’re a healer, and now your dream knight knows you can see in the dark and find your way through buildings. Oh, and have this tall, sleek dragon friend. How will a few centuries matter?” Mab-Abin was annoyed at the small woman pacing around the clearing.

“It matters!”

“No, it doesn’t, Eiferra. Eafa didn’t keep his long life secret except when he was pissing people off, and I doubt your mother would have done had she lived.”

“It was different five hundred years ago!” Once again, the woman found herself missing her mother. “People back then knew about magicians, about finders and wave talkers and the rest. Other than healers, you never hear anyone talk about magicians now, and nearly all the healers I have met had no real skill at all outside of knowing their herbs.”

“You still have to tell him who you are.”

“What, say I am not really human either?”

“You are human enough, Eiferra. You are just... dragon as well.”

The feeling very ancient one sat on a log outside her cottage with a groan and looked up at the big desert dragon. “You don’t actually know what I am at all, do you?”

“No, not really. Other than perhaps you are the proof that it shouldn’t matter what you are.”

“Oh, Mab-Abin, what am I going to do? He is going to ask where I have been for the last few weeks.”

“Tell him. Eiferra, you are paired with a dragon. You can fly halfway around the world to buy a beer. They have a foot of snow up here, but you have been playing in the sea while I have been away. You cannot tell him about what we have found in Hebbut, about why I am here or anything else without being honest, which includes what is waiting for him at your villa. He is a King, he runs a country, and does it better than most, which is the whole point. We need him, dear little friend, and he will need us.”

Ferret glanced down the track, the sound of approaching, trotting horses echoing through the woods. “This will be him now. I said he should come alone.”

“I don’t think he’s yours to boss around.”

“Nope, that’s your job, dragon boy.”

“Love you too. Now, want me to do something spectacular?”

“No thank you. I already had you showing off as we left.”

“I thought that looked good.” Mab-Abin sounded hurt.

"I nearly fell off!" Ferret grinned up at the Draig yr Anialr. "No, it looked good. Here they come."

Three horses trotted into the clearing where Ferret had her woodsman's cottage; the king on one, Sir Terran on another, and, to the Ancient's delight, Anna, the eldest of the rescued children, sitting on Merry.

"Oh, Anna!" Ferret ignored the two men and hugged the girl as she climbed cautiously off the unpredictable horse. "I didn't think I would see you again."

"I came to thank you, miss. And your friend."

"Well, there he is," said Ferret with a mischievous smile. "Looks smaller in the day, I always think."

"No, not really." The girl sounded like she would love to thank Mab-Abin, but probably by letter.

"His name is Mab-Abin. He is one of the Draig yr Anialr, the desert dragons, and he is a lot of fun when he's not showing off."

Anna bit her lip, swallowed, and walked over to the dragon who was trying to make himself look somehow smaller. He gave up and lowered his head to the girl.

"Hello," he said, softly.

"Hello." The girl looked over her shoulder for reassurance. "Thank you, sir," she said to the dragon. "You saved our lives."

If the girl was expecting some formal speech or something fairy-tale dragon-like, she was about to get a lesson on how differences are invented and are often not real.

"Hey, that's okay," said Mab-Abin, "Are you alright? We have been really worried about all of you."

"I'm alright," said the girl with surprise, then looked up at the big, concerned eyes. "No, I'm not. I've lost my family!" As Ferret ran over to the girl, the dragon reached forward and pulled them both into his arms.

King Hornan Liander looked on and shook his head. "Terran, I came up here ready to have a shouting match with that bloody healer about, well about everything."

"And?"

"And everything I was going to say would have been wrong and idiotic. Terran, how can you love her?"

"Hornan!" Terran's eyes opened wide in panic.

"She makes us look so damn stupid half the time! Worse; she's right!"

Ferret tucked the girl into her bed and returned outside to where the king waited with Terran and Mab-Abin. Anna had cried herself into exhaustion and had refused to let go of the desert dragon until Ferret had surreptitiously used her skills to calm her down and had taken her into the cottage.

"We've been waiting for this to happen," said Terran as Ferret lit a fire in the brazier outside. "Is she alright?"

"Asleep. It's warm and cosy in there, and she doesn't look like she has slept properly for weeks. What's happened to the rest of the children?"

"Three of those you rescued were from another village," explained Hornan. "Those were the three youngest. They had been stolen rather than the village attacked so we've returned them to their parents."

"Where is this village?"

“They are not from Kend, but from a village called Cothol in High Sen. Seems their authorities didn’t give a damn. We just rode in and handed the girls back. The village elder was stunned we were from here.”

“What about the children from Farnen?”

“That has been more difficult. The three younger ones have been taken in by families in the town of Cullin Falls here. Anna, who is fourteen, by the way, has refused to leave the burh. She has not cried, not smiled, and has spoken only when she needed to. We have been terribly worried about her. It was Sovan’s idea for her to come with us today. He is the only one she has talked to at all.”

“Damn, and I wasn’t here,” muttered Ferret.

“You cannot be everywhere, Ferret,” said Terran. “I know that look.”

“She tries to be,” complained Mab-Abin. “One of the reasons she’s so fun to be around.”

Hornan looked up at the dragon. “So, would either of you like to explain who you are?”

Ferret pulled a face and took a breath.

“Actually, I’ll start this,” said Mab-Abin with a chuckle. “My rider has some issues that are annoying me, so it’s easier if I just put my big dragon foot in it now. My name is Mab-Abin, I am a Draig yr Anialr, and five hundred years ago Pree was my rider and my friend.” Hornan and Terran just stared. “Your turn, girl,” said the dragon, looking down his nose at the woman. “Or I can just keep going for both of us.”

“I hate you, Mab-Abin. King Hornan, Sir Terran, my name is Eiferra, as you know. My father was Eafa, sometimes known as Weasel. I was born in Gornenshire just at the end of the war against the Haftens. That makes me not much younger than this brainless idiot here.” Ferret smiled sweetly at the dragon.

The Ancient and the dragon sat in silence while the two men gaped. Then Hornan started to laugh. It was only a chuckle at first, but it grew in strength and volume till he had to sit himself down on one of the logs that Ferret used for chopping wood. He continued to laugh with his shoulders shaking, his hand on his chest, and tears running down his face, till he was nearly breathless.

“Hornan?” Ferret was not sure what she was expecting, but this was not it; of that she was certain.

“Oh, dear, dear lady. That is priceless!” The man took a deep breath and blew out slowly. “I am sorry, but, oh dear, I would love to know what is going through my friend’s head at this precise moment!”

His friend was stood quite still, and his expression was that of the deer who has just worked out what a longbow is for.

“As my big friend here likes to point out, how old I am or what I am shouldn’t matter,” retorted Ferret. “It didn’t to my mother who was a thousand years younger than my father. Personally, I would rather leave it there and talk about more important things.” Ferret was genuinely annoyed, and the king smiled, recovering his composure.

“You are right, Ferret, and I apologise. However, I have no idea what to ask you or what you want to tell me. You saved my life on one day, discovered the mayor of Cisson was in league with a warlord a few days later, and then you organised a dangerous rescue mission which, I have since discovered, was close to being a disaster. By that point I was fit to throttle you, to be honest, as I really do not appreciate being run in circles. Then it turns out you ride dragons and even have one you call a friend. And now you summon me here having vanished for a month. So, tell me, where do I start?”

“You don’t, we do,” said Mab-Abin seriously. “And really this is more about me than it is about the Ancient.”

“Ancient?” The king looked at Eiferra.

“Please, it’s just a silly title,” said the woman in exasperation.

“Perhaps,” said the dragon, giving her a steely look. “During the last war with the Haftens and the Heinela Cwendrin, the dragons began to die from a disease. I will not go into details as, to be honest, it’s not something I understand very well. However, every dragon that caught it died, there were no exceptions. I, like so many others, lost family and friends. Eafa tried to find a cure but could not, and all that was left for us was to flee to a distant land, not on your maps, where the disease didn’t exist.

“Now, these many years later, the disease has changed, and it is no longer fatal to the dragons. Where we have been living is a beautiful land, but for many of us, including some who were born there, it is not our real home. For me, my home is an abandoned city in Bind, for other’s it’s in the mountains to the north of us here or along the coast. Hornan, we want to come home, but it’s not that simple.”

Terran had stopped impersonating venison and had sat down next to his king. “Why isn’t it? You are here. Surely it is only for the others to join you?”

“That it true, Terran,” said Mab-Abin. “But it would be wrong for thousands of us to just turn up and settle down.”

“Thousands?” said Hornan with surprise.

“Of course!” said Ferret. “Dragons are one of the main intelligent species on Dirt; you don’t get just a couple of hundred of a species unless it’s about to die out.”

“I hadn’t thought of it like that.”

“But apart from the practicality, there is a more important, older, and more fundamental reason why this must be done in the right way,” said Mab-Abin. “And this is going to need a history lesson.”

There were times that Silvi felt so pathetically eighteen that she wondered why on Dirt Be-Elin had ever chosen her to be her rider. When they had left Sir Hal in the long fields, her parting joke had been that they would need to talk to his big brother. In the intervening time, she had spent several foolish but gorgeously cathartic days in Meressa Town with Teni while Be-Elin had been away, and had then spent the rest of her time in Ponack. She was now back in the long fields, sitting on the logs around the campfire with a knight named Nolenn from the capital Riena, Sir Hal from Levin Burh, and his brother Edver Kellin, King of Hertenesse.

“Don’t keep correcting them, Nolenn. I really am not that bothered whether anyone calls me sire or not. You know that.”

“As you wish, sire.”

“Be-Elin,” said Sir Hal. “I understand what you say about hundreds if not thousands turning up, but this is an empty land, parts of it anyway.”

“Silvi has said the same thing.” Be-Elin had laid her hides on the ground and was sitting on them neatly, lying slightly on her side so her head was closer to the height of the humans. “You have to understand that the desire for the dragons to come back to both Bind and Preland is strong, but not if it means returning to how it was five hundred years ago. If you go back several thousand years, human and dragon society was much closer. They didn’t necessarily live in the same place, but they had a common cause, worked together, and even played together. I am lucky that I saw that in my own lifetime. Tellor’s ancestors...”

“Who is Tellor?” asked the king.

“Tellor is in charge of the archers with Silvi here. Or was.” Sir Hal had grown fed up of hearing complaints about Silvi being missing.

“Tellor is descended from two riders called Gellin and Feline,” continued Be-Elin. “I knew both, and Gellin was a personal friend. The humans and dragons of Ponack in the Sand Hills shared our lives in most things from farming and fighting to helping to protect the Pharsil-Hin nomads; we even drank together. But we were unique; that closeness had long since vanished from the rest of Bind and Preland. By the war, Draig Mynyth Coh and Draig Morglas, who together made up the majority of my people on this side of Dirt, had turned their backs on humans almost entirely, and some humans were actively trying to drive dragons from their land. Dragons are not territorial like humans, you have to understand. We fly. On my own, if I fly high enough to catch the winds, I can cross Bind in the same time that you can ride through your kingdom. The idea of borders is ridiculous to me.”

Silvi was watching Be-Elin carefully. The two of them together had been like a couple of sisters. They played in the sea, messed around in training, and sat up long nights while Be-Elin extracted every naughty detail of Silvi’s little affairs in the White Pony, and had responded with graphic details of her own exploits over her many years. But Be-Elin was almost six hundred years old and had been paired with General Farthing during those continent breaking wars. There was another, sterner and wiser side to this dragon which could too easily be forgotten.

“So you want it to change?” asked the king.

“It very nearly did,” answered Be-Elin. “During the war, a few hundred dragons of all species worked with Silvi’s ancestor General Farthing on an equal basis. Farthing was my rider, but we were friends too, close friends. And then, when the disease struck, right at the very end, some humans over here in Bind, in places like Meressa and South Homeland, came out of their villages and helped dying dragons, but it was too late. We had to leave, and it was only for a moment, and involved far too few dragons and far too few humans anyway.”

“You could stay in your own lands,” commented Sir Noleen. “You said earlier it’s beautiful.”

“Yes, it is. But there is something far more significant than just getting on with one another. I’m sorry, you are going to have to take this on trust a bit.”

“Humans and Dragons need each other,” said Mab-Abin. “It’s as simple as that.”

“In what way?” asked King Horan.

“This I find hard to explain because I’m not sure I understand it myself,” replied the dragon slowly. “The human population grows much faster than dragons. This didn’t used to matter, but when the original Heinela Cwendrin and Haftens arose, they were keen to push dragons out of the way while they fought for control of the two continents. It didn’t work. It placed people in opposition to each other, not just dragons and humans but humans and humans, and ever since, society has lurched from one oppressive system to another. The war I was involved with was meant to solve that, though it was not why it was started. Pree and Farthing only wished to get rid of her father who had sold her into slavery, and put the people in charge of Redust rather than being ruled by just one man. But it spread over most of the continent, helped by how dragons can carry information so quickly over long distances, how we can help join things up together. Then the disease struck, and it took the all-important role of the dragons out of the picture. Thousands of us died, and the rest had to flee. Horan, you have to understand that the lands I left five centuries ago, here in the south, had a bright future with the people deciding their own

fates, trade opening up, and populations growing. When I returned last year, it was like the entire world had been somehow pushed back into a dreadful past.”

“I don’t have the benefit of your years, Mab-Abin,” said Hornan. “But yes, this is a fractured and miserable land for many, and I so wish to see that change.”

“We know you do, Hornan,” said Ferret earnestly. “That is why we chose to be here.”

“Your kingdom, Edver, is full of the descendants of my people,” said Be-Elin. “As I explained, in Ponack when we talked about the people of the Sand Hills we meant both humans and dragons. Ponack was a prosperous and close community simply because we worked together, not apart. If dragons had not had to leave because of the disease, and if we had been able to build on the trust people like Farthing and Pree and we had for each other, then I believe there might have been a chance for Dirt to have been a much better place to live in. But the dragons left so it didn’t happen. Maybe it was not the right time anyway; I don’t know. Now this land is full of countries like Calon and Tulinor and the Kingdom of Senness in the south, places where the people only survive by the whim or favour of their rulers.”

“My brother and I have always had this dream, Be-Elin,” said Edver Kellin. “We inherited this land from our father and him from his father. I do not want to pass it on to my children if that is possible. Could I be the last king of Hertenesse? I would like it to be so, but it may only be a dream.”

“Then, if that is truly what you see as the future, perhaps we can help you.”

“Your problem to the north is worse than you think, Hornan,” said Ferret to the king, handing over the flask of whiskey that Terran had produced. “I’m sorry it’s so cold out here. We had intended to talk in Mab-Abin’s house on the hill, but I can’t leave Anna here alone.”

“I would rather sit in the cold knowing you care for the child, Ferret.” The king took a swig and passed the flask back to Terran, then reached over and took two more split logs from the pile and put them in the brazier. “We have been making our own enquiries over the last couple of weeks, and they seem to be more organised than that raid would indicate. Have you any more idea what that was about?”

“Why they massacred the entire village? No, I have no idea. I think the taking of the girls was just for the slave trade, opportunism, though worrying in itself.”

“It’s ironic the war all those years ago also started with an act of slavery,” said Mab-Abin thoughtfully.

“You think we will face a war?” The king looked alarmed.

“Yes,” replied both.

“Why?”

“One of the reasons I am not going to go into because I am unsure about something, so please, allow me that for the moment,” said Ferret carefully. “The more immediate reason is that Mab-Abin and I have been scouting farther north than you can easily, and there are signs of organisation and, more worryingly, signs of alliances.”

“In what way? I assume you have not been able to drop in with your dragon and ask them.”

“I am not her dragon,” pointed out Mab-Abin flatly.

“I am sorry, Mab-Abin; I am out of my depth with you.”

Ferret smiled warmly at the king who she really did like, despite his occasional temper. “That you even admit to that says much to your credit. I can see why Terran thinks of you as a friend.”

Terran had said very little during the conversation, and Ferret had been aware that he kept looking at her, trying to work her out. Apparently the man either thought her stupid or deaf, but she was well aware that he had fallen for her. What she had not yet decided was what to do about it. For the moment, it seemed very unimportant, sadly.

"I sometimes question his friendship, I admit, and I am not sure I always deserve it," said Hornan. "Then again, he has moments of abject stupidity too. Particularly over the last few months."

"As you rightly guessed, I am not that easy to hide," said Mab-Abin with a chuckle. "But we have been able to get close enough to notice that some of the armed groups have the same emblem, which we think is the crest of the Categan king, or very similar."

"They are one of the more powerful of the northern kingdoms," said Terran. "Another place my father traded with when I was young."

"Terran's father used to trade regularly with my father," explained Hornan. "That is how the two of us met. After his father died, he joined the stables here at the burh."

"If they have allied with Hebbut, then there must have been some changes," continued Terran.

"It may not be an alliance," remarked Mab-Abin. "From what you have said before, those running Hebbut and the other small Kingdoms north of the mountains are not from a line of monarchs but are simply one warlord taking over from another. They may even be controlled by Categan."

"If they are as organised as you say, they could walk in here and crush us," said Terran bleakly.

"Terran is right," added the king. "We are not a wealthy land. I do have troops, mostly stationed on the borders, but not many."

"We see no indication at all that they are about to move south," said the dragon. "Though I would suggest you protect that pass to Hebbut. I assume you have had no response from our rescue mission?"

"None," said Terran. "But then we went to a lot of trouble not to look like knights, and from what we saw, they didn't follow us."

"We chased their horses away and made sure they saw us flying north," Ferret explained to the knight with a smile.

"Oh, we did wonder."

"But though they might not be interested in you yet," she continued, "if they are building support and allies in the north, at some point they will turn south. You need to be ready."

"How do I do that?" asked the king.

"You put the Southern States back together again."

"What my brother has been doing here in the south of Hertenesse, and you have been playing a vital role in that Silvi, has been crucial to what we want to achieve. If we can bring stability and purpose to Hertenesse, then we can create a land where the people can play their part in the future of their country. I still cannot believe you are only eighteen, by the way," said Edver with a bemused smile.

"Mistry, one of the most influential and respected riders in those old wars was only sixteen when the war started," said Be-Elin. "By the time she was nineteen she was a hero as was her pairing Mab-Onin. There is a village just up from here named for him."

"I always wondered at the name of that village," said Hal.

“Inua is another that is named after a dragon,” added Silvi. “Be-Inua was the dragon leader in Preland during the war.”

“Has our history really been so forgotten?” asked Edver.

“I am sitting here feeling like you are discussing a different world,” said Nolenn. “I have never heard of any of this.”

“I have a strange friend in Meressa Town,” said Silvi. “He is a tutor and historian who tried to tell me the history of dragons. He has so much of it wrong, including his knowledge of the war, and yet he has studied it half his life. Be-Elin, we have to go visit him one day, you will so piss him off!” Silvi grinned broadly, and Hal burst out laughing, gaining him surprised looks from Nolenn and the king.

“I am sorry, brother,” he said. “You do not understand what this girl means to us all here. Yes, she is a dragon rider and the best damned archer in the kingdom, but she also brought so much fun to that bloody drab castle. When she was attacked, I saw all that stripped away and really feared I would not see it return.” He looked at the young woman, and his smile faded. “I am sorry; I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“Hal, don’t apologise. There are evil shits everywhere, and even my brothers tried to get rid of me. Whatever happens, there will always be people like Jon and his friends. This is not about that, and as long as justice is served, I’m not going to lose any more sleep over it; I’ve promised myself that.”

“You are very lucky to have a friend like this, Be-Elin,” said Hal to the dragon.

“I know I am,” replied the Draig yr Anialr. “What you say about history is true, however, and significant. Strong, stable societies do not forget where they came from. The very fact that some people think I am a myth just speaks to how much this world has fallen apart since I was here. I know I am long-lived compared to humans, and I will live several more centuries yet, but you have to remember that for me the events everyone has forgotten about are within my lifetime.”

“How can we learn from history if we do not know what it is?” asked Nolenn.

“Which brings me back to what I do now,” said Edver. “As of this moment, I am looking at the possibility of being wiped out by Calon before I get near to creating our dream country. And I am sitting in the middle of a field with two old knights, an eighteen-year-old archer, and a five-hundred-year-old dragon.”

“Would another ten dragons and riders help?” asked Be-Elin.

“Ten?” spluttered King Hornan.

“Well, ten dragons,” said Mab-Abin. “We will need to train the riders.”

“Do you not have riders in your lands?”

“The riders will come from your people,” said Ferret. “But we will train them.”

“What do I do with them?”

Mab-Abin stared at him. “Well, not wishing to be sarcastic about this, I can tear a man in half in a second. I can throw a spear farther than you can shoot a bow. I am bigger than a whole team of horses, and I fly so fast that Eiferra has been able to keep her house going in Gornenshire and a cottage in South Ham!”

“What, right in the south?” asked Terran in amazement.

“It’s only an old fishing hut by the sea,” said Ferret, feeling embarrassed.

“So,” said Mab-Abin irritably. “What you have to ask is what you can do with ten of me.”

Ferret reached out and put a hand on Mab-Abin, quietly telling him to shut up. “At the very least they can scout for you, get massages around quickly, and help you build relationships with others in the south. More importantly, they can help your people to build friendships with dragons once again, and the other way around. If I have one criticism of your country, and therefore maybe of you, it’s that your people are not confident about themselves. They trust you, they like you, and they believe in you, but they are worried about their future. I see it when they come to the cottage for herbs and healing.”

The king nodded and sighed. “You are right; we are not confident about our future,” he conceded. “I think this land is better off than our immediate neighbours like High Sen, but no one really knows what will happen tomorrow. Maybe your dragons can make a difference. Perhaps a legend coming to life is exactly what people need.”

“But there is a condition.” Silvi looked straight into the eyes of the king of Hertenesse. “If we are to bring back dragons, then you need to be part of this and not just look like you have paid us to drop in.”

“Yes, I understand that. All three of us, I, Hal, and Nolenn, have always known that you cannot ask someone to accept something that you have not shown that you accept yourself. So, what is the condition?”

“You have to come with me to collect the dragons from Ponack.”

“Me? Fly?” King Hornan Liander looked like his horse had just died under him.

“I do the flying, actually. You just need to hang on,” pointed out Mab-Abin.

“I will be with you, Hornan,” added Ferret. “I am not so cruel that I would leave you alone with Mab-Abin the whole way there.”

“Why can’t they just come here themselves? They are not like your idiotic horse!”

“Because they are people too, Edver,” said Silvi impatiently.

Nolenn was obviously struggling with the familiarity assumed by the young woman, and frowned slightly.

“I understand that, Silvi,” said Edver.

“Then you also should understand that you need to come and talk to them. Be-Elin might be their leader, but this is not like a troop of thick soldiers that you just order around, no offence to any thick soldiers under your command. If they come here, then one day they may want to make their home here.” The king looked blankly at the girl.

“Oh, bloody hell, brother!” said Hal, grinning. “They want you to invite them.”

“They need to feel welcome,” added Ferret. “They have just made a long, dangerous journey. They have not come here because they have been ordered to; they have flown here because they want to come home.”

“They are willing to come and help you, which might be very dangerous,” said Mab-Abin. “In the last war scores of dragons died in the fighting. We might be powerful, but we can still be killed. That is why I wear hides, and in a battle, I wear heavier leather too.”

“Me flying is not funny, Terran,” said Hornan.

“I never said it was.”

“Then stop laughing.”

“Sorry.”

“You are right. All of you are right,” conceded Edver Kellin. “If this had been a horse ride away, I would have not thought twice about it. I will come. When do we go and how long will we be?”

“You need to find warmer clothes and less metal,” said Be-Elin critically. “I don’t like clanking when I fly.”

“I have clothes you can wear, brother. Good thing you don’t wear a crown.” Hal was chuckling. “I am sorry, but I had forgotten what you looked like when you get scared.”

“We will leave in the morning, Edver,” said Silvi. “We are going to the abandoned city of Ponack and will stay there a day or so to give both you and them a chance to meet each other properly. It is much colder than here, but we have somewhere for you to stay which is warm, and there is no one there to disturb us.”

“This is important, Hornan,” said Mab-Abin. “Dragons might not understand why humans feel territorial, but they know you are. All of these dragons are very young, and none were born here. They have as much to learn about humans as you have to learn about them. Eiferra is different.”

“Silvi is a rider already,” said Be-Elin. “She already thinks more like a dragon than a human sometimes which they like. When they come here, it will be a foreign land to them, one that they are desperately hoping will become home like it was for their families. It will need you and the people here to convince them that it is.”

“We will leave in the morning,” Ferret told the king. “It is a long trip so we will make stops on the way. You are not able to fly as high as Mab-Abin can because the air is too thin, so he will not be able to travel at the speed he otherwise could.”

“Where are we going?”

“To my villa. I think you will like it. It is warmed by the currents of the Missing Sea. Even this time of year it is warmer than here.”

“What about Anna?” asked Terran.

“She can stay here tonight. I will bring her back in the morning.”

“In which case, I will go and find some more-practical clothes,” said King Hornan, standing and walking over to his horse. “Coming, Terran?”

“I will be along in a few minutes.”

“Alright,” said Hornan with a smile, mounting his horse, and trotting back down the path towards the burh.

The three sat in silence for a couple of minutes before Ferret gave the dragon a nudge with her foot.

“Oh, yes. I need to go and sort my hides. I will see you in the morning, Terran.” The big, and occasionally awkward desert dragon leapt into the air and disappeared over the trees.

“I wasn’t deceitful out of malice, Terran,” said Ferret. “I didn’t even want to say half of what we have told you today. My big friend persuaded me I was being stupid.”

“Why didn’t you want to tell me?”

“This is not a disguise, Terran. I am not going to suddenly break some spell and turn into an old hag. This is really me, how I actually look, and how I am. It is how I have looked since I was twenty, about five hundred years ago. You have spent the last few months thinking I am this

mad, young woman. I have seen it in your eyes, and I have enjoyed every minute of it. How was I going to tell you that it was all a lie? Because it isn't completely. Just the age bit."

"How long will you live? Will you get old like the rest of us do? Ferret, I don't understand so much of this."

"My father was over a thousand when he was killed by being stabbed; I can die as easily as you can. My mother died when she was young from an infection, but if that had not happened, she would still be alive now. My grandmother was over a thousand years old when she died. My grandfather was three thousand years old when he died. I might live to his age or I might be killed by a wolf the next time I leave my cottage."

Ferret walked over to the knight, took his hand, and gently pulled him to his feet.

"When I saw you jump up onto the dragon at the hunting lodge I thought I was having some mad dream," said Terran. "You looked beautiful and dangerous and like something from another world or a story. But, I don't know, I was also proud of you. You are trying to tell me that you are no different from the healer who has been helping people from the farms and villages, but you are wrong; you are different. You have come out of hiding and the real you is different. I feel I have to get to know you all over again."

Ferret looked up at him and smiled. He was right, of course. She hadn't been pretending to be someone else when she came here, but she had been hiding part of herself. A few days before she had been in Gornenshire, sitting on the beach and trying to work out exactly what she would say and do today. She had left there without making any sort of decision at all and had needed Mab-Abin to all but order her to be sensible.

"You are right, and I have been hiding. Partly I had no choice because I had to help keep Mab-Abin hidden. Before I came here, the two of us were searching for any descendants of the riders who moved to Preland after the war, hoping that if people knew about their ancestors then they would be open to the dragons return. We found no one or none that remembered their ancestry. Then we found Kend and Weidess Burh. When my father used to stay here, the back wall of the great hall was missing, and Mab-Abin and other dragons could join in with the meetings with Pree and Farthing. My mother met my father here. My half-sister who I never met was here for a while too; she had a crush on Farthing. This is a very special place for my family; not just important because of the war, but a place full of love and warmth. I know about what happened in that kitchen because my mother told me the stories when I was little, and Mab-Abin still tells me them now."

"I wondered how you knew so much. I almost thought you were making it up."

"I'm not very good at making things up. My father was better at it, I believe. I never met him."

"I am sorry."

"But it's still a special place, Terran. Hornan wants the right things for his people and has the right ideas. This is the place I should be and, more importantly, the place the dragons need to be. So, I'm sorry I have been hiding, but most of it has been me." Ferret looked at the knight sideways. "When we get time, I will take you to my favourite cove in the south. But first, we have to make this a place fit for both dragons and humans to share."

Edver Kellin, king of Hertenesse, stood on the slopes of Mount To-Pon in the Sand Hills looking out over where the dragon village at Ponack had once stood, and into the faces of ten great desert dragons. The flight here had been terrifying. They had first flown through a blizzard, and then above the clouds which had left him freezing cold, breathless, and dizzy. His

respect for the power of Be-Elin and the skill of Silvi had grown league after league as he had watched them work together like twins. The banter between them had been constant and surprisingly rude, especially from the dragon, but it had taken the edge off the arduous journey, and he had landed in Ponack in a much better mood than he had expected. The town was a wonder, and he felt sad it had been abandoned for all these hundreds of years. Tucked away amid the sand and dust of the ruins was Silvi's small rider's house and the one next door that she had cleared out for him. They were a warm, fire-lit haven in the bitter, northerly winds, and he had slept better than he had for years.

But now he faced ten proud Draig yr Anialr; desert dragons who had flown from some mysterious land on the other side of Dirt, and who wanted to know if this could be the home they so needed to it to be.

"If you have come here hoping for a land ready to open its doors to you and greet you like long-lost brothers and sisters, then I'm afraid I cannot offer you that. I wish I could." He looked at the faces who were watching him impassively. "The truth is that I do not know of anyone now who hates dragons, but I do not know of anyone who remembers them either. You are the forgotten people, just stories for children or in dusty works by ill-informed historians.

"In these lands of Bind, the people who live here like me, have lost our way. The countries have been torn apart, have forgotten their own history, and are now suffering while greedy and cruel men fight for control. In the last five hundred years since this great lady Be-Elin left this place, we have become half a people. We are missing what we need to become whole again, what we need to build a proper future. We are missing you.

"If you have come here to ask me where your home is I have no answer for you. If you have come here hoping to build a new home, then I will welcome you with open arms and build with you. The people of Hertenesse will build with you."

Edver stood for a moment longer then returned to his rider's house. Silvi and Be-Elin had been right. This hadn't been some silly ritual; this had been critically important. But as he had spoken, the reality of how broken Bind was had hit him hard, and had left him feeling desolate.

Later, Silvi knocked at his door.

"You have someone who wants to talk to you. Come on."

She led him up along a different path into a large ruined room and then out on to a terrace where stood one of the desert dragons.

"My name is Mab-Horin. Tomorrow we will fly with you to your lands, we will find somewhere to live, and we will help you build a better place. When we leave here, you will fly with me as my friend. You are not ready to be a rider, and I know that because of your role that may never be possible, but friendship is important to dragons. I cannot imagine building anything with anyone who was not a friend."

The king looked up at the big dragon, much larger than Be-Elin, and his serious face broke into a smile. "Mab-Horin, I have been in a very depressed mood this afternoon. I was brought up in this lost world, but I have never put my worries into words as I did today, and my world suddenly seemed very dark. In this moment, you have made it just a little lighter. I would very much like to be your friend and to fly with you, if I may."

Silvi smiled and left the king and the dragon talking on the terrace outside the ruins of the Hen-Thyn tavern, the place of meeting so loved by both dragons and riders. For the first time in her young life she felt she had achieved something important, beyond something just for herself. Now she wanted to find her best friend before the dragon sneaked away with one of the young males.

"This is a very special place." King Hornan was sitting at the big bleached table in the kitchen of Ferret's villa drinking some of her own wine.

"It has an odd history. My mother and Elgrieve, my half-sister, were rescued from here by General Farthing and Weasel when it was thought their lives were in danger. Weasel burnt it down for some reason that I'm a bit confused about. I believe he meant it to look like they had died in a fire, but then he left that rude painting that sits over his grave, so I'm not sure what he was up to. Later, after my mother's first husband, Sir Tannon Linland, had died, and she and Weasel had fallen in love, she rebuilt this villa while he was back in the east. Sadly, he was killed without ever seeing it or knowing about me."

"I am sorry you never knew him, or he you."

"It's a long time ago, Hornan. I was seven when my mother died, and I only just remember her. I was brought up in a castle some leagues away until I was twenty, and then I moved back here. When I was a child, these lands went through a civil war that lasted years. In some ways, they have never recovered. Like the rest of Preland, it is a shadow of what it was. It doesn't have some of your problems. There are no bandits or warlords, and though we still have the duchies, that is really just a convenient name, and we cast off feudalism centuries ago. Generally, the West is at peace, but it is disorganised, fearful of returning to its past, and impoverished both north and south. The people have little."

"You love it here, don't you?"

"I do. But I love my small cove and beach in South Ham too. This might be my family's home, but that place is all mine. No one had lived there before, and the hut was used for storage by an old fisherman who died about four hundred years ago. It is the only other place Mab-Abin and I could go where he didn't have to be careful of someone seeing him. It is warm almost all the year round, too!"

The sounds of bellowing and laughter filtered in from the beach.

"The desert dragons love the sea, don't they?" commented Hornan.

"They are very young, those dragons, but I think the biggest idiot out there is Mab-Abin." Ferret looked over her mug at the king. "They liked you, you know. They will come."

"They asked me so many questions and left my head spinning. Did you know they were going to do that?"

"I had no idea what would happen, and neither did they. Mab-Abin and I decided we would just let it happen, whatever it would be. This was too important to be forced."

"I didn't understand how important it was till I met them here. You were right, it needed to be away from the kingdom and not on my territory. When I met Mab-Abin a few days ago, I had trouble reconciling his voice and his intelligence to this dragon sitting in front of me. I know it is unfair for me to say, but I really was confused. Talking to the dragons today, the young males and females, they became a real people right in front of my eyes; in many ways, it was no different from that silly dinner in the kitchen."

"Silly?"

"Yes, of course it was! I am planning on repeating it, though. Especially now I understand how you knew so many details from the past. I know the castle has been repaired since those old, romantic days, but I hope we haven't spoilt it."

"No, you haven't. That dinner was special to me because it meant I could touch my own family in a way I haven't been able to before. I can find my mother all over the west. She was a great writer, and many of her words still exist. She and Evana are the reason many people here

are literate today, something that should be addressed in Kend. But my father only spent a short time here, and he was such a wanderer throughout his life that it's hard to pin him down to anywhere. There must be something about him somewhere, places he lived or were important to him that I do not know about only because my mother was waiting till I was older to tell me. I have no idea where my grandmother lived before she came here. So Weidess Burh is the closest I have managed to get so far."

The evening was drawing in and a red hue flickered through the shutters into the villa. Hornan stood and walked to the windows and pushed the shutter open. "What are they doing?" he asked.

"I'm not sure." Ferret walked out to the beach followed by the king, and they stopped either side of Mab-Abin. Stood along the shoreline in front of them, with their feet in the gently lapping surf and facing the setting sun, stood the ten young Draig yr Anialr. When the sun touched the horizon, they raised their heads and started to sing.

Ferret had never heard anything so beautiful, and she cried as the notes wrapped around her and touched her heart. When she looked over to the tall king, she saw tears running freely down his face.

"Come with me," said Mab-Abin, and he took the hands of the Ancient and the King and walked them down to the waves to join the young dragons, to stand amongst them and listen as they sung their song of hope and longing to their kin far across the Missing Sea.

Chapter 12 – Old Tricks

“But they are all so young!”

“Don’t.”

“But they are; look at them. Really cute!”

“I said don’t!”

“Oh, come on, girl. If you were a dragon, you would go for it, admit it. Especially that Mab-Corin. Or even Be-Laka!”

“Be-Elin, behave. They are all over five hundred years younger than you!” Silvi was trying not to laugh.

“So what? Dragons don’t do all that wrinkly skin thing that you humans do, not until ancient, and I am fitter now than I think I’ve been for years.” Be-Elin looked longingly at the ten desert dragons in the new dragon training camp near the peak of Levin Tor above Levin Burh.

“Anyway, you’re too late.”

“I know!” Silvi burst out laughing. They had spent the last two weeks rearranging Sir Hal’s forces at the burh to more closely match what had been used centuries past at Ponack. At the same time, the dragons had been making a small dragon village farther down the mountain and had cleared an area to build barracks for the riders and their infantry. “So, how was he?”

“Beautiful!” purred Be-Elin. “And energetic; I’m shattered.”

“Well, I don’t care if you are, big dragon girl, but you better not be wearing out my shiny new dragons.”

“You can’t talk!”

“Oh, I am being a good girl. Hilda has let me rent that room permanently now, all paid for by Sir Hal. I am cosy and warm in there and all on my own!”

“Won’t last.”

“Will too!” Silvi was lying on her back, leaning up against Be-Elin’s tail. “Mind you, there is this rather lovely girly who delivers the milk to the tavern,” said Silvi, giggling.

“Are you going to?”

“Nah, not at the moment.”

“Have you given up on men entirely then?”

“It never really happened between me and men anyway; it didn’t feel right.” Silvi sighed and laid her face against Be-Elin’s warm skin. “I couldn’t face a man like that now, Elin,” she murmured. “The tavern feels safe; I want to keep it that way.”

“I know, girl.” The two had been spending as much time together as possible. They had to get back into the habit of working together if they were going to train the new riders and dragons, and Silvi wanted the special closeness they shared following the incident with Horan’s brother Jon. She had not spoken about it to the others at Levin Burh, but Be-Elin had been watching the young woman carefully. Such violence was unheard-of amongst dragons. Be-Elin

had not been able to explain why that was, and she found it impossible to understand why these men would want to act in such a way. But she did understand the hurt, and her heart ached for the girl.

“Change of subject, please, Miss Dragon, or I am going to start tickling.” Silvi poked Be-Elin hard on the top of her tail and leapt to her feet.”

“Promises! No, you are right. You go and shout at the archers, and I will go yell at the boys and girls. Ready?”

“Ready, Be-Elin. Day one!”

“Well, she conjured up ten dragons from nowhere; do think she could make a thousand or so archers suddenly appear?”

“That would be useful, Nolenn!” said Sir Hal, leaning back in his chair. “Sadly, I think it is our problem to solve, not theirs. Mind you, because of her dragons, my new squad of archers has gone from forty to twenty, and she has borrowed fifty of the irregulars too.”

“What does she want them for?” Sir Nolenn had found himself transferred east to Levin Burh by the king who was determined to raise some kind of decent-sized army, but had only ridden in the night before.

“Apparently, although Ponack was famous for the dragons and riders, they also had infantry and they worked closely together. Be-Elin is keen to replicate what they did back then, which is understandable. Silvi doesn’t want to create jealousy or resentment by the dragon riders being seen as the elite. She is very sensitive about people at the moment.”

“What is happening to those men?”

“They are standing trial in the capital next week. One of the men has turned on the others, for reasons of his own, so we can keep Silvi out of it. Deffane is on his way to give evidence. There is not a hope that they are going to get away with it, and they will be ancient by the next time they see daylight.”

“Good. Are you alright about it now?”

“Apart from feeling that it is somehow my fault? Nolenn, it doesn’t really matter how I feel, it is nothing like what she went through. Silvi is now living at the White Pony permanently, and I am paying her rent. I know that’s a bit odd, perhaps, but right now, she and Be-Elin are the most important people in the king’s forces, and I will do anything to make sure she is alright.”

“She got to you, didn’t she?”

“Yes, and to my brother.”

“Does she know why?”

“No. I still miss my sister after all these years, Nolenn, but I am not going to put that one on Silvi just because they happen to look alike.”

“That is fair, old friend. We are still short of one army, though.”

“Well, an idea has come up from both Deffane and Be-Elin. He has told me previously that he would not have had the same trouble recruiting archers with longbow experience in Preland because it’s used by hunters, particularly in the south. He was surprised how few people use it here or prefer the short bow. Be-Elin has added that at Ponack everyone could use a longbow, whether they needed to or not. It was almost their hobby and local sport up in the Sand Hills. So, the idea is to somehow promote the use of the longbow in the villages. Be-Elin says that some of the riders were as good as Silvi with the longbow, especially any with a Pharsil-Hin background; the bows they used drew two hundred pounds.”

“Bloody hell!” Nolenn’s eyes opened wide. “I tried pulling Tellor’s and that was hard enough.”

“His new bow is heavier than his old one. I think he was fed up at being outshot by Silvi.”

“Is he going to be a rider?”

“No, he isn’t. Despite his ancestry, he is scared of heights, would you believe? Silvi has explained there is no way around that problem; being carried by a dragon is scary, and if you cannot find your balance you are in real danger. He will be in charge of training the archers on the ground, and to be honest, he is going to be worked ragged. But that still leaves us with a recruiting issue. That camp in Calon is not going away.”

“So, what is your plan?”

“I have to find a thousand archers, Nolenn, and we are going to need twice that in infantry soldiers. We have five hundred knights around the kingdom, but we can’t take them all as Calon is not our only problem. But even if we have three thousand or so here, the Calon army still outnumber us, and they have a head start on training. I need ideas.”

“Well, I have one for you, but it’s really just underlining what you have already pointed out. In an old-fashioned set piece battle, we have lost before we have even started.”

“So, what do you suggest?”

“We don’t create the army you have described and look at this another way entirely. Is Silvi and her dragon around?”

“If you want to avoid being eaten, my friend, I would never suggest that a human possesses a dragon in any way whatsoever.”

“Oh. Do they actually eat people?”

“No of course not, but if Silvi hadn’t stopped her, Be-Elin would have crushed that soldier in a blink of an eye.”

“Where are they at the moment?”

“Up at the new training camp. You ought to go and see it anyway; you have a lot of catching up to do.”

“I know I do. I’m not sure if this is possible, but I am wondering if there is any way I can have a good look at that camp in Calon from the air.”

“I suppose so. Gods, Nolenn, this is still new to me too. I have been watching the two of them ride like a stampede through my castle rearranging everything. They are building new barracks for those under their command, they have told all the other foot soldiers and archers that everyone will have chance to work with the dragons and get to know them, they have stolen a bunch of farmhands from I don’t know where, and are buying sheep and goats from all over the place. Did Edver tell you how this is being paid for?”

“He mentioned some arrangement with Be-Elin.”

“He will have to pay for human recruits, but the dragons have arrived with enough coin and gold to support themselves. They have paid for the training camp and the new barracks without even telling me about it; they just went ahead and did it.”

“Why? I know this is all about them having a home, but they are helping to save our arses!”

“They haven’t said much, but I think Be-Elin fears this will go wrong, and they don’t want to do anything that will make them unpopular with the locals. They want to be loved, Nolenn.”

“Don’t we all. Right, Sir Hal.” Nolenn headed for the door. “I am going up to this new training camp to see Silvi and Be-Elin. Later, I will want to try my idea on you and see if it leads anywhere.”

“If I am not here when you return, I will be with Tellor. I want to talk to him about turning the people of Hertenesse into a country of archers.”

“And they won’t see us from down there?” Nolenn was sitting in front of Silvi, holding on to two straps on Be-Elin’s hides.

“They will see us,” said Be-Elin over her shoulder, “But they won’t know what we are; we are too small at this height.”

“How far to the camp now?”

“Not far. It’s really easy to see from the air.”

“Isn’t that always so?”

“No. This is one of the few good things to come out of dragons being forgotten,” she explained. “Tekkinmod hid his more secret camps in forests so we couldn’t see them so easily.”

“That is not the best place to set up a training camp,” commented the experienced knight.

“It is if you want to stop dragon scouts finding you.”

“You see those low hills to the east?” Silvi tapped the knight on the shoulder and pointed. “The camp is tucked between them.”

“Can you hand me my bag?”

“Hang on.” Silvi grabbed the knight’s bag from behind her and hung it around his neck for safety. “I’m going to get you a softer bag.”

“Why?”

“If you drop it, and it hits Be-Elin, it can hurt her. A soft bag doesn’t.”

“Still pisses me off!” remarked the dragon with a loud laugh.

Silvi was impressed by the knight. She had only met him the once before when she had first met King Edver, and he had spent more time listening than talking. But when she and Be-Elin had been approached by him the previous day, the man had shown a very quick understanding of the relationship between dragon and rider, and of what they were trying to do in the training camp.

“A spyglass?” she asked over his shoulder.

Nolenn wrapped the strap of the old ship’s spyglass around his arm. “Been in my family for years. I thought it might be useful.”

“I am going up higher,” called out Be-Elin. “I will stay over the hills rather than the camp itself because you won’t be able to look directly downwards.”

“I understand. It’s getting colder.”

“It’s never warm up here,” said Silvi. “That is why I wear these unglamorous leathers.”

“You look gorgeous in them!” said Be-Elin.

“Behave!”

“Farthing and Pree both began wearing their riding leathers even when not on dragons,” said Be-Elin, looking over her shoulder. Nolenn had been a bit disturbed the first time she had looked around at him when flying; it felt a very dangerous thing to do.

“Why?” he asked.

“You have to remember that neither of them had a background in the military. When Pree began building her army of volunteers, they had no money for armour, but they had access to a lot of leather. What Silvi is wearing became almost like a uniform. Even the irregular infantry wore something similar. But it paid off, in the end.”

“How so?”

“You saw how easily Silvi ran over to me this morning and jumped on my back?”

“Oh, good point. No, I couldn’t do that in my armour, not even with the plate removed.”

“If you want your army to be different, to fight differently, then you may wish to think about that. Here is the camp. Tell me where you want me to go.”

“As you are is fine for the moment.” The knight looked out over the camp trying to understand the overall layout and then put the spyglass to his eye. “You are right about it being organised, but this is all new to them, I reckon.”

“In what way?” asked Silvi.

“They have cramped the tents too tightly together for a start and worried more about neat rows and columns than practicality. Also, I can’t make out the differences between companies, platoons and so on. A lot of empty areas too.”

“I see what you mean,” said Be-Elin. “Soldiers in our camps always knew where they belonged just by how it was laid out. I had forgotten that, sorry!”

“Be-Elin, can you circle around the hills without it looking too obvious?” asked Sir Nolenn.

“Yes, if you don’t mind me going a bit higher to be safe.” The dragon turned slightly south then gently beat her wings taking them up another five hundred feet. Keeping a steady pace, and remembering how Farthing had used his spyglass, she spent the next hour circling the camp, banking gently to her left to allow the knight a better view.

“Be-Elin, that is perfect. You bring a lot of experience with you,” said the knight, putting his hand on the dragon’s neck without thinking.

“Thank you! Have you seen enough?”

“For the moment, yes.”

“I will find somewhere quiet to land for a short rest, and then we will fly back.”

“Tell me more about Farthing’s irregulars,” said Nolenn to the dragon. They had stopped ten leagues from the camp on a wooded hillside and had lit a small fire. Spring was well and truly on the way, but the air was still cold.

“I thought you would be asking me about the dragons!” said Be-Elin, laughing.

“Oh, I will do, but my priority at the moment is what sort of army Sir Hal and I build for the king.”

“In the final push, the battles were mostly traditional though we used irregulars when we could,” explained the dragon. “Really they had no choice since that was how both Duke Henry and Tekkinmod were arranging their armies and turning up for the fight.”

“Duke Henry?”

“The war was between three groups. The Heinela Cwendrin from the west commanded by Duke Henry Harnon, the Haftens from the north under Belin Tekkinmod, and Pree in the south. Pree was vastly outnumbered, so Farthing gave up with traditional battles, which would see them wiped out, and used irregular tactics to push the Heinela and the Haftens together. Once they locked horns, Pree retreated to the south-east and left them to destroy each other. Farthing then built an army of more than nine thousand and confronted the victor, which was Tekkinmod.”

“So how much did you use irregulars?”

“A lot. They were under the command of two colonels, Martin and Doritha Heel, husband and wife. Doritha was probably the best archer in the army. Martin was a much older man and had fought in earlier wars specialising in street battles in towns. He almost never used swords but used two long knives, similar to those Silvi and the riders uses. Between the two of them, they became experts at sneaking into anywhere, laying traps, and, especially, blowing things up. Oh, I had forgotten about that.”

“What?”

“Towards the end, they were using blackdust all the time.”

“We use it too, but it’s not very effective.”

Be-Elin frowned. “Why not?”

“Well, it makes a lot of noise and smoke, but other than blowing a door in, or in crackers at street parties, it doesn’t do much damage.”

The dragon blinked and looked from Silvi to Nolenn. “I don’t believe this. You mean you don’t use it for mining or for incendiaries, setting fire to things? Do you use desert fire?”

“We use blackdust in mining to weaken walls, but I have never heard of desert fire,” replied Nolenn.

“My aunt told some stories when I was little about a wizard blowing up a mountain or something,” said Silvi. “But she was always telling strange stories, and I was only four years old. I don’t remember her very well.”

“You can’t do anything like that, as far as I know,” commented Nolenn.

“Yes, you can,” said Be-Elin with a deadly serious expression. “I can’t believe this has all been forgotten. What has happened over the years?” she said in exasperation.

“Are you alright, Be-Elin?” asked Silvi. The dragon was obviously annoyed.

“This world of Dirt, Bind and Preland. What happened? We spent years and lost thousands of lives to build a better place. And look what I have returned to! Everything has been forgotten. I have been forgotten. Silvi, I lost all but one of my family to the disease and to the war. Many of the soldiers who fought with Farthing lost everything. Pree lost everything. I knew that Bind had fallen apart, it was never exactly a stable place to begin with, but I thought some things would be better after all these years. Better farming, better tools, better weapons; I don’t know. I’m a dragon; humans do all this better than we do. But no!” Be-Elin looked like she wanted to punch something, and her eyes moved from Sir Nolenn to Silvi in frustration. “I noticed this before. Silvi, show Nolenn your sword or knives. Put them next to his.”

They put their weapons on the ground near the fire. The knight looked at his sword, one of high quality, as deserved by a knight to the king. Then he looked at Silvi’s short sword and picked it up.

“They are different,” he said. “My uncle was a smith and I know a little.” He took both swords and tapped the tips on a rock, listening to the sound they both made. Then he looked at the edges and the way the blades were secured to the hilts. As he examined them more closely, he frowned and shook his head. “Silvi, where did this come from?”

Silvi pointed at the dragon.

“I brought them with me,” said Be-Elin. “All her kit is from me. I had them made for her before I came back to this land.”

“The metal is so much better quality than mine,” said Nolenn. “I wouldn’t know where to start to make this.”

“Nolenn, it’s just a sword made of the quality of steel that all swords should be made from. Your sword is like the poor-quality weapons we were issuing to the regular troops before we could employ better smiths. This is what I’m talking about. It’s like this world has gone backwards. You have forgotten everything!” Be-Elin stood up and growled to herself. “Put that fire out and get on my back. Nolenn, you are right to use irregulars, but you have a lot to learn. I just hope I can remember enough. Come on!” she growled at them impatiently.

A cold rain returned to Hertenesse that evening when the sombre group gathered in Be-Elin's dragon house on the far side of Levin Tor.

"I really thought that I would just be bringing in a handful of dragons and training some riders to support your efforts here, but I never realised how unprepared you all are." Be-Elin frowned. "I can only hope that those in Calon are equally unprepared."

Silvi had never really asked the dragon about her role in the wars five centuries before other than Farthing being her rider. She was now getting a history lesson that was leaving her feeling like a helpless child.

"You don't need to match the Calon army sword for sword, which Nolenn has already realised, but you must outmatch them in every other way," continued Be-Elin. "Right now, you are lacking in several essential areas, one of which I just do not know how to solve."

"You are describing us as if we are people from the Stone Age, Be-Elin!" snapped Sir Hal. "I am commander here in the south, and that really is not true."

"Hal, I am not good at being subtle or careful about my words, so please, I apologise in advance for any insults, but you need to understand who I am. Pree's army, who were the victors in the end, though little good it seems to have done, was an army of thousands with a supply chain spread across the entire south of Preland. It was made up of regular troops, cavalry, knights in full armour, nomad archers, regular longbow archers, and desert dragons. It was supported by hundreds of wagons, drivers, and both red and sea dragons. We even had our own small fleet of ships supplying coal and iron. We were fighting forces that were more than twice our numbers and better equipped. At the head of the army were two generals, though only one carried the name, Johnson Farthing and Be-Inua. I worked directly under both of them. I know this is so long ago that none of you can even begin to understand it all, but trust me, I really do know what I am talking about!"

"Alright, I accept that, Be-Elin. So, what is missing?"

"My biggest concern is with your ordinary weapons, but I'm not a smith and so don't know why your swords are so inferior. Something about the iron? Or the Steel? Someone must know! To be honest, if you went against Farthing head-to-head with your sword, and I remember how hard he used to hit, I think your sword would break. That worries me."

"And you cannot get us more from where you got Silvi's and the other riders' weapons?" asked Sergeant Mennon.

"No, I can't. Iron is heavy, too heavy to bring over, and you don't realise how hard it was to get these made in the first place. But someone somewhere on Bind must still have the knowledge. It can't just have vanished. What about in the north, whatever Wesson is now? That is where Tekkinmod was from. Before we blew them up, he had the best coal and iron mines in Bind. His forces had superb weapons in the early days; we know, we kept stealing them."

"It's mostly bandit country up there, now," said Sir Nolenn.

"Tellmond?"

"The town is still there," said Sir Hal. "But I admit I know nothing about it."

"Tellmond..." Tellor was playing with something in his hand.

"What it is, Tellor?" asked Silvi.

The archer looked at what he was holding. "Be-Elin, look at this." He threw over the small object and she caught it neatly.

"Arrowhead. Hmmm. Good metal. Silvi, throw me over one of the broadheads from the pot." Be-Elin had been making arrows for Silvi in quiet moments and had brought over a stock

of arrowheads with her. Silvi leant behind her, opened the big jar, fished out a broadhead and threw it over. "The same quality as ours. Where is it from?"

"Tellmond," said Tellor. "Or the metal is. There is a smith up in Given that buys iron and steel from there. He only makes farm tools, usually, but he made me up some arrowheads for hunting. I'm sorry, I know nothing about metal, so I didn't really notice a difference. His farm tools have a reputation for lasting years, especially scythes and plough blades which get a lot of rough treatment."

"Sir Nolenn?" Be-Elin looked over to the knight who smiled.

"I will ride up there in the next couple of days," he said.

"No, Sir Nolenn," said Be-Elin. Silvi will arrange someone to take you. We need people to see us now, especially if they are anything like the villagers in Ressen Valley. They've been really welcoming."

"Be-Elin, they have been hiding in the Pony!" said Silvi, laughing.

"Well, it's a start. So, that is the first problem."

"It's not solved," said Sir Hal. "Even if this man has the better iron and steel, we still have to make weapons and pay for them."

"You are going to have to make them anyway, Sir Hal," retorted Be-Elin. "Twice, if you use crappy metal!"

"Point taken," said Sir Hal flatly. Silvi felt she might have to do some relationship counselling at this rate. She was reasonably sure she was still officially working for this man; he was paying her rent.

"Which brings me to the other forgotten skill; blackdust and desert fire. Eafa and a dragon called Mab-Tok, together with Tellor's ancestor Gellin, worked on ways of making blackdust much more powerful. They then combined it with either whale oil or desert fire to create incendiaries that were used to blow up buildings and set fire to whole forests. They also used it to collapse a series of mines and blow up a mountain pass; that might be where that story comes from, Silvi."

"But we don't have that now," said Mennon. "And I wouldn't know where to start to make it."

"Well, thankfully for you, I refused to carry the bloody stuff till I knew what was in it. If you know people who have the skills, I remember some of the ingredients; enough that they can work out the rest, perhaps."

"This is probably one for my brother to sort out," said Sir Hal. "He is more likely to have the right people in Riena because we mine in the Dondor Mountains in the west. Now, what else is wrong with my army?"

"Archery is probably the biggest problem," said Be-Elin. "But you know that already; that is why we came to you in the first place."

"This is my area," said Tellor. "Sir Hal spoke to me about trying to get more people interested in the longbow, and I know Deffane has some ideas which I will ask him about when he gets back. But I was thinking about what you said about it being almost a family hobby in Ponack."

"It was," replied the dragon. "Children used bows from five or six years old; small ones with no points on the arrows. Depending on how fast they grew, some were using longbows, lighter ones, when they were fourteen or fifteen. There was a lot of rivalry between families. When we recruited more riders, the one thing we didn't have to worry about was whether they could shoot."

“Well, it’s the rivalry I was thinking about. Sir Hal and Deffane were talking about giving out bows to villagers and teaching more people to make bows, strings and arrows. But it struck me that if people have no reason to use them, they will just sit in their houses gathering dust.”

“So, how do you solve that?” asked Silvi. “Send them out hunting? They’re all farmers here.”

“No, that would be pointless. I was thinking about competitions. If people know they can win a couple of coins or something, then perhaps some will be interested. I hadn’t worked it out much past that, to be honest.”

“Don’t look at me,” said the dragon. “That sounds very human like. We would do it just to annoy someone.”

Hal burst out laughing. “Now that I can believe.” Be-Elin glared at him. “I think it may need to be a combination of ideas,” continued the knight. “Perhaps writing a law that says all adults have to practice with the longbow every week, though not make it too much of a chore, and then add competitions, both locally, regionally, and nationally. This still does not give me the archers I need now.”

“It might do,” said Nolemn. “Particularly if one of the incentives is getting a paid job here in our new army. There are many families out there who could do with the extra coin.”

“You are still missing the bloody obvious,” said Be-Elin to Sir Hal, testily. “I have already told you at different times that many of the soldiers in Pree’s army were volunteers, most of them I believe. We might have kitted them out, trained them, and fed them, but we didn’t pay them, and those that were paid later only received a tiny amount of coin from their own country. But none of you has thought to ask me why they volunteered in the first place!”

The dragon house fell silent though it was clear that Be-Elin was in no mood to just give them the answer.

“Now it is my turn to apologise, Be-Elin,” said Sir Hal. “You are right, and I know the answer. They volunteered because they knew they had to. They were protecting their families.”

“You have a growing threat sitting just thirty leagues away,” said Be-Elin, pointedly. “They are not the Haften Hordes, they may not be well-armed, and we do not know how well they are trained, but if those forces arrived today, they would tear the south of your kingdom to shreds; maybe all of it. As it stands, the people of Hertenesse wouldn’t even know the names of those who were killing them. We had volunteers because the population and the councillors were frightened. We even took a pile of them up on dragons to show them a camp like the one in Calon just to make the point. For everything you need to do, you have the justification sitting there waiting to be used. So, bloody well use it!”

When the meeting ended, Silvi walked Tellor and Mennon to their horses and left Sir Hal, Sir Nolemn and Be-Elin on their own.

“What was it like during those old wars?” mused Tellor.

“I wasn’t there,” said Silvi, laughing. “I am only, well, eighteen.”

“We knew that all along,” said Mennon. “You are the same age as my eldest daughter.”

“Oh.” Silvi chuckled. “Be-Elin has told me a lot, but there must be so much more to tell. I do know it was nearly a disaster. That is what that was all about in there. Be-Elin lost both human and dragon friends because of mistakes they made, or where they did not scout enough, or because they underestimated their enemy. She is worried we are unprepared to fight a war that is coming whatever we do. She is right as well. It scares me.”

“You are more honest than most of us, Silvi,” commented Mennon. “I know where I stand with you, because of that. I appreciate it.”

“Would you be able to take the odd day off from the training here?” asked Tellor.

“Are you asking me out, Mr Tellor?” Silvi grinned.

“I wouldn’t dare. Your friends are far too big! No, I was thinking about these archery competitions. You and I have both been playing that trick with the fourth hidden target in the long fields.”

“How does this fit in with your competitions?” Silvi asked him.

“Perhaps, just occasionally, we can give demonstrations; you know, trick shots and so on. I know you have been practising shooting two arrows at once, for instance.”

“That is not a bad idea, Silvi,” said Mennon.

“We could combine it with villagers meeting dragons,” said Silvi thoughtfully. “Remember, Be-Elin has two aims; one is helping the king, but far more important is building relationships between people and dragons. In Ponack, it was not just riders and rider’s families that mixed with dragons, everyone did. Many of the dragons around the hills never had riders and weren’t involved in any of the fighting; they just lived there. So perhaps the two of us can fly in on a couple of dragons, give them a show, and the dragons can talk to the villagers.” Silvi grinned, then looked over to Tellor and burst out laughing.

“Silvi, I can’t climb a tree without feeling sick!”

“Tellor, you will never be a dragon rider, I know that, but we can tie you on and you can lie flat and keep your eyes closed. You’ll be all right.”

“I really wish I hadn’t mentioned the bloody idea now!”

“The two of you are going to have to stop shouting at each other.”

“Why?” Sir Hal and Be-Elin both turned and stared at Sir Nolenn.

“Because it is stupid, if nothing else. You both want the same things and you are both frightened of the same things going wrong. Admittedly, Be-Elin is probably better at expressing it, but you both know what has to be done.”

“I can’t watch you fail,” said the dragon bluntly. “But I only have ten dragons and my experience, and that is not enough to stop the sky falling down on you.”

“Why do you care so much?” Sir Hal looked up at the big desert dragon.

Be-Elin snapped her head around in anger, then pulled back then she saw the honesty in the man’s eyes. He really wanted to know. She took a breath. “Because of that girl out there and what she stands for. She is the first human rider I have had since I left from the south of Bind all those years ago. I don’t care what all the old stupid myths and made up religions say; humans and dragons should be partners in this world. In the old days, when a dragon chose a rider, it was called a pairing and was celebrated. It was special for both of them. The greatest pairing was between Mab-Onin and a young woman called Mistry. When Mab-Onin died of the disease and Mistry returned to Ponack, she was carried in an act of love by Bren-On, the oldest of the desert dragons, as high into the sky as he dared. Every single dragon who lived in those hills took to the air with every single rider who was there. It was seen as that important.”

Be-Elin was visibly upset, and without thinking, Sir Hal walked up to her and took her large hand.

“Sir Hal, that has been missing from Dirt for all these years, and these lands are hurting. We have to put right what has gone wrong, and that means those like you and your brother who

believe your country belongs to people and not rulers must succeed. The risk of failure scares me to my bones!”

“I am sorry, Be-Elin. I am being selfish. I have been concerned why you and your friends are coming to fight for us. I had forgotten we are also meant to be fighting for you.”

“I don’t suffer fools, Sir Hal. The trouble is, I am not good with talented, honest people like you either. If it’s any consolation I used to shout at General Farthing when Pree wasn’t watching.”

“What did he do?”

The dragon laughed. “There is a fundamental difference between you and Johnson Farthing. You were brought up in a castle, he was an orphan living in the poorest place on Dirt, stealing to have enough food. Trust me, he could get angry and swear like no other!”

“Good,” said Sir Nolenn impatiently. “Now you two have kissed and made up, can we go and kick the shit out of the Calons?” He turned and stormed out of the dragon house.

“So, that is the connection.”

“This has to be the last level; it is nothing more than a wet cave!”

“Interesting statues, though.”

“It’s a dump!”

“Well, yes, old man. But at least they dumped them down here rather than throw them away.”

“What is the Cwendrina standing on? It is not the posh plinths these other ones have.”

“Oh, I’m an idiot! I spent months looking up at that every day and didn’t see what it was. It’s Bell-Sendinar’s favourite perch! It’s Taken Mountain.”

“Makes sense. It’s right in the middle. Oh, it makes sense in another way, girl.”

“What?”

“There were all these passages and rooms in Taken that were too small for the greater dragons. I assumed they were for the lesser dragons, but I bet they were for humans.”

“They need each other, don’t they? Humans and dragons are both meant to be here, and are meant to work together.”

“You sound mystical, girl, and you hate mystical.”

“This is not mystical, old man; this is common sense. It’s natural in the same way that two plants will grow in the same place but will only thrive if both are there. I learned that from Lilygwin. That’s it. That is what the Cwendrina is for.”

“What?”

“Stopping what is happening now; stopping both dying out. That is what you were for, too. You even told Bren-Diath that. Human civilisation is going backwards outside this abbey. They have forgotten their past, and they have forgotten their cleverness. The population has shrunk and they are living more primitively. Right, we must go to Angyn.”

“What are we doing?”

“We have to bring the dragons back, dear old man. I must find the route so we can put it back the way it was before the Haftens, the Heinela, and that silly religious nutter.”

Chapter 13 – Helping Friends

“Dad!”

“Keep quiet, Ben.”

“This is not right!”

“I said quiet!”

“Listen to your father, boy or I will shut you up for him.”

“Leave my son out of this!” snapped the forester at the big bearded man sitting at ease on a large black stallion. A sword flashed into the man’s hand and stopped inches from the forester’s face.

“I always forgive just the once; my mother taught me that. Speak like that again and I will take your throat out, followed by your son’s, understand?”

“I didn’t mean it!” The forester put his hands up and took a step backwards. “Ben, go back to the village, now. Now!” The lad turned and ran back to their tiny, poor, woodsman’s cottage, slamming the door shut.

“Better,” growled the bearded man, and put his sword back into its scabbard.

“We haven’t got what you want,” insisted the forester. “We don’t have that sort of coin in the entire village!”

“I don’t care.” The Lord’s Lieutenant had ridden up from the capital Oben in High Sen with ten armed men, and had been kicking villagers out of their houses and counting heads of people and livestock. They now wanted tax paid, and it was more than the village would see in a year. “The new Lord is a thorough man, you see,” said the lieutenant, looking at the ends of his fingers thoughtfully. “He has been through all of his father’s records and he has noticed that your village hasn’t paid tax in years.”

“We pay our taxes every year!”

“A tiny donation, that is all. You have been hiding the rest I reckon. So now we want it.”

“We don’t have it!”

“Not my problem. Steal it, dig it up, whatever. But I am a fair man. I will give you two weeks to pay.”

“We can’t find that much in so little time!”

“Then I will start taking anything I think is worth something. Tools, animals, girls; don’t care really as long as I can sell it on.”

“Why are you doing this?”

The sword shot out again, and this time, it sliced down the man’s face. The forester cried out as the blood pushed through the deep cut.

“Listen carefully. You don’t get to ask questions of me. Your situation is simple. You will be a serf or a slave. Which you are I decide.” The lieutenant sat back up. “Two weeks today. Either you have coin or we take what we want and who we want. Leave and we will hunt you

down and kill you.” He turned his horse abruptly and rode from the village followed by his cruel men.

The forester watched the men leave, blood flowing in rivulets down his cheek and onto his neck. The other villagers huddled together. Two weeks; that is all they had before they either lost everything or were killed. There was no other choice he could see; none at all.

Ben grabbed a clean rag, dipped it into the small stream that ran through the village and marched up to his father. The lad was only fourteen, but he was tall for his age and had strong arms from using his axe day after day. He put the rag on his father’s face and lifted the man’s big hand to hold it in place.

“I’m taking Jess,” said the lad. He had heard everything from the cottage.

“What for? Where are you going?”

“To get help.” Ben walked back to the cottage to unhitch their old horse Jess from the log cart.

“Where are you going to find help?” shouted his father.

“Kend. I am going to see their king.”

They didn’t own a saddle, and the twenty-seven-year-old horse was the only horse in the village big enough to ride, but the animal was strong, despite its age, and Ben had ridden him before. The boy hadn’t been more than two leagues from his village in his life, but he knew which way was west and he knew what he could or couldn’t eat in the woods. He was sure there was a village called Farnen somewhere over the border; some men from Kend had mentioned it six months before. He took his axe and a bag of dry bread and biscuits, and jumped onto the old animal. He would start there.

“What’s the matter now?”

“I have a backache!”

“You always have backache, Be-Sula. You are a big girl and carrying the lightest rider too, so I have no idea what you are whinging about!”

“Is she complaining again, Mab-Tenn?”

“Guess!”

“Come on princess, tell mummy Lena!”

“You spoil that girl, Lena.”

“You are just jealous, Tenn,” said Be-Sula, chuckling. “Are you coming on patrol with us, fatty? Since your rider has a broken arm.”

“Might as well. The silly git; I keep telling him it’s safer on a dragon than a horse.”

“Yeah, apart from the bit that when he fell off his horse, he only broke his arm!” said Lena, hopping up onto Be-Sula. “Oh, your back is suddenly all better, then.”

“Course! Just winding up fatty here.” The dragon leapt into the air with a whoop from her rider and a grumble from Mab-Tenn as he chased her tail.

That the young Be-Sula constantly referred to Mab-Tenn as fatty was more or less a running joke. The brown and sand-coloured Draig yr Anialr were often regarded as one of the most beautiful of dragons, with the exception of the Draig Awyr. They were slimmer than Draig Morglas, the sea dragons, had narrower wings, and were definitely the fastest of the greater dragons. Mab-Tenn, however, was slimmer than most and his colouring was nearer cream than brown and almost white in places. When he raised his semi-diaphanous wings in the sunlight, people, both humans and dragons, would stop and gaze dreamily at him. He hated it.

“Mab-Abin wants better mapping of the ridge to the west, and then we should do a circuit back up and around Farnen,” shouted Lena to Be-Sula as they flew from the camp close to the pass into Hebbut. They were part of a new company of dragons, riders, and horses run by Mab-Abin and Sir Sovan.

“If you two are mapping, I will stay lower and see if there is any movement on some of the smaller passes,” shouted up Mab-Tenn from below. “We had a couple of packhorse caravans pass that way last month.”

The main pass into Hebbut was regularly watched by Kend, though there was little activity aside from some basic trade. Mab-Abin and Ferret had been back to the Prelate’s Hunting Lodge at night, and though still occupied, it was less well guarded. However, more activity had been spied farther north in Forthen and Categan, but what troop movements they had seen from scouting at high altitude, were heading north and west not south. No one was going to be upset about that for the moment.

The early summer sun was the warmest it had been for two weeks and the heat rising from the lowlands was creating warm winds and eddies around the mountain peaks. Lena looked down at Mab-Tenn who was flying five hundred feet below them, snaking in and out of the peaks and gorges with a graceful ease that she couldn’t even begin to match as a human on the ground. When the dragons had arrived at Weidess Burh at the beginning of winter, she had been walking her horse out from the paddock in the woods behind the small castle. Eleven beautiful creatures had swooped down through the snow and from two of them had climbed the King and the healer Ferret. Lena had stopped so suddenly that she had slipped and sat down hard in a small snow drift. She had heard about Mab-Abin, but she had not yet seen him, and in her heart, she had been sure the description of this enormous, terrifyingly magnificent creature must be exaggerated to an implausible degree. The reality left the story wanting. When volunteers had been sought to become riders, she had been the first at Sir Sovan’s door.

“Be-Sula, can we stop on that peak to the south-west?”

“Why, Lena?”

“I want to mark up the map before I forget, and I still can’t write when flying.”

“Fine by me.”

The dragon dropped down to the slightly rounded peak and Lena slid off her back.

“This is a good spot!” said the dragon turning around slowly. “Good view of the pass behind us and the roads up through the valleys. Write it down and call it something; Mab-Abin will like that.”

“What do I call it?”

“I don’t know. Good views and comfy grass Tor?”

“Silly dragon!”

“Are you saying that my years of wisdom are not charming you?”

“Girl, you are only fifteen years older than I am!”

“Yeah, baby dragon me. Still, I learned to fly early.”

“Why can’t you fly when you are very young? I know you talk about strength, but surely you are smaller too. I mean, young birds fly.”

“I suppose it might have something to do with not being birds, idiot!”

“Yeah, yeah. But, no, seriously?”

“It really is just about strength, though not just muscle strength. Our wings, our middle limbs, are weak when we are young. I could use them when I was fourteen or fifteen for short gliding, but flapping? Forget it! I looked about as clever as you do when you flap your arms. I

was strong enough by my early twenties, and I was up and away in weeks. Where are you going?”

Lena was climbing down from the smooth, bare summit to where the woods grew up the flanks of the tor. “Just looking around. There is an old goat trail or something here. You could hide stuff down here if you wanted. Anyway, I’m still trying to think of a name.”

“How about Scout Tor? That covers both of us.”

“That will do it; nice and short and I can spell it. Right, anything to add?” The girl showed the rough map to the dragon.”

“You have that ridge line too long, but apart from that, it’s better than it was.” Lena rubbed out the lead line and redrew it.

“He does love his maps, that old dragon,” commented Lena.

“Hey, girl, he’s not that old! Well, yes, he is. To you and me.” Be-Sula chuckled. “But he’s got another three hundred years in him yet.”

“What is it like to have so many years ahead of you, Sula? You and I are not much different in age, but I will be ancient when you are still thought of as young!”

“I don’t know. I have nothing to compare it to. In the old days, dragons didn’t choose riders till they were much older than me, but then, everything about this is a bit strange. I only have to fly a few leagues in any direction and there are no dragons; none. Just me.”

“Yeah, but I’ll be with you.”

“Oh, that’s alright then. Shall we go find that luscious boy?”

The three scouts, for that was what they were mostly for the moment, swept down from the warm mountains and out over the forest that covered the foothills. Everyone working under Mab-Abin and Sir Sovan worked hard. If they were not posted to either border duties or on a longer scouting mission, they were carrying messages or visiting villages. Ferret and Mab-Abin were very keen that everyone got to meet a dragon, but the king was taking advantage of this connection with his people to spread and collect news. It might not have transformed the fortunes of the citizens of Kend, but it was changing everyone’s understanding of their country and what their king wanted for their future.

“I hate this part of the circuit,” said Lena. They were approaching the deserted and ruined village of Farnen, site of the horrific massacre over the last winter. Although the king had sent up volunteers to move the dead to a proper graveyard in the woods, no one else had been near the place and no one wanted to live there. The village reeked of sadness, and the three lapsed into silence as they sailed quietly over the ruins.

“Hang on a moment!” Mab-Tenn back-flapped into a hover. “Who is that?”

They were flying at over five hundred feet, and Lena was having trouble making out what Mab-Tenn was pointing at.

“I’m going to land,” he called out.

“Land at the other end of the village,” suggested Be-Sula. “Just in case.”

The dragons banked around and landed softly at the far end of the village. Lena jumped off as soon as they were on the ground.

“Who is it?” she asked. “He isn’t moving.”

“He has a horse; it’s grazing over by the stream,” said Mab-Tenn. “Shall we talk to him?”

“I’ll go,” said the woman. “Not everyone has been charmed by you yet.”

“Be careful, then.”

Lena slipped her longbow off her back, took an arrow from her quiver, and held it loosely. She walked along the banks of the stream cautiously to where the figure was sitting on an upturned cart. He was a boy, just a young teenager.

"Hello?" She circled in front of him; close enough to talk, but far enough away in case he did something stupid. "Are you alright?"

"I'm lost, I think." The boy spoke quietly.

"Who are you?"

"Ben. I'm from Cothol."

"I don't know where that is, I'm afraid," said Lena, moving closer.

"I thought there was a village here and I came for help, but everyone has gone."

"What sort of help?"

"What are they?" He looked over at the two dragons.

Lena studied the young lad carefully. She could see he was starving hungry and hadn't slept for days.

"They are friends. How long have you been travelling?"

"A week over from High Sen. I think it should have taken just a few days, but I got lost in the forest. Am I too late?"

"Too late for what?"

"My village. They said if we didn't have coin in two weeks, they would take everything we own; take people too, girls."

"Who did?"

"The men. The lieutenant from the Lord in Oben. I came to see the king."

"Our king?"

"The king of Kend. His knights brought the girls back last winter, the girls that were stolen."

Several pieces fell into place, and Lena remembered the three girls being taken back to somewhere in High Sen. She decided the boy was no risk and walked up to him. He was tall for his age, but his face was young and he was in pain.

"Ben, my name is Lena. Can you stand up?"

"I don't think so. I hurt my leg in the woods. I think it might be broken. I've been sitting here all night."

"Alright, just stay there, and I'll be back in a second." Lena ran back over to the dragons.

"Mab-Tenn, go get Ferret as quickly as you can. How fast can you get to the Burh?"

"Very fast without a rider. And she can go higher than you when she comes back."

"Go then, now. Tell her the boy is hurt and his village is about to be attacked."

The young dragon leapt into the air and flew straight for the clouds.

"Be-Sula, I think he is too weak to be frightened of you. Can you help me? He has hurt his leg and has been sitting on that cart all night, too scared to move. Also, I need you to find his village."

"I will take my hides off and he can sit on those. You walk ahead of me."

They walked up to the boy cautiously, trying not to scare him. Mostly, people had been very accepting of the dragons and though many had been initially scared, they had been helped by being with lots of other people who were also afraid. This boy was on his own.

"Ben, we are going to help you lie down so I can look at your leg. I'm sorry, this will hurt, but before we do that, can you tell my friend here where your village is? Her name is Be-Sula."

"It's called Cothol. I'm sorry, I don't know where it is on a map, but I think it's thirty leagues east of here, maybe a tiny bit south. I think that is where I went wrong. It's in the

middle of a forest in a big round clearing with a stream, and has lots of thatched cottages in a circle.” The lad touched his leg and winced. “I’m not sure what else to tell you.

“I will find it, boy,” said Be-Sula gently. “Now, let’s get you off that cart.”

Between the two of them, they laid out the hides then helped the tall young lad to sit down. He wept in pain as they moved him, and Lena could see he was right; his leg was broken badly.

“Go, Sula. I will look after him till you return.”

“I doubt there is anything I can do there, so I will just find it and get back here quickly.”

“Okay, and thanks.”

“No, this is our job. Nice to be doing something that’s not mindless scouting.” The dragon leapt into the air and flew off over the trees.

“Drink this, Ben. It’s fresh water,” said Lena. “And I will sort out your horse. You are lucky he has not wandered away.”

“He is old and I think he is lost too.”

“Yes, I think he probably is,” said the dragon rider with a sigh.

Mab-Abin landed with a skid and Ferret jumped off his back, running straight over to Lena.

“That was fast!” said Lena.

“What’s happening?” asked the Ancient. “Mab-Tenn was exhausted when he arrived.”

“This lad has broken his leg. He was trying to get help for his village in High Sen. They have been threatened with attack by a lieutenant of the Lord of High Sen if they don’t pay what he’s demanding.”

“So why come here?”

“Their village is the one those girls were stolen from. Can you help him? He passed out about an hour ago. I don’t think he’s slept for days. He got himself lost.”

“Oh, poor lad. Go and grab a couple of those bits of fencing for a splint. We’ll sort his leg while he is still out.”

“How far away is the village?” Mab-Abin asked Be-Sula, who was marking out a quick, rough map.

“About twenty or so leagues as the dragon flies. I’m not surprised he got lost; it’s a mess of little tracks and dense forest between here and there.”

“I gather they had trouble finding it when they returned the girls last winter. Did you land?”

“No, I didn’t. To be honest, I only saw a couple of people wandering around, but I thought it better to return here first.”

“How much do you know about this threat?” The two dragons were walking over to where Ferret was binding the boy’s leg.

“I only arrived back half an hour ago; it took me a while to find the village.”

“He told me this lieutenant turned up six days ago with ten armed men,” said Lena, looking up from where she was helping Ferret. “They turned everyone out of their homes, counted how many there were, had a quick look at what livestock they had, then demanded hundreds of coins. The boy says it’s more than the entire village sees in a year. His father is a forester and the village elder so spoke to the men. When he told them he couldn’t pay, they cut his face open.”

“Oh, bloody hell,” said Mab-Abin. “So, what is this threat?”

“He is going to return in two weeks to the day, he said. If they don’t have the money, then they’ll take tools, animals, whatever, plus any girls or women to pay the debt. If they try to leave, they will hunt them down. After they left, the lad just jumped on his old horse and rode here.”

“What do you think, Eiferra?”

“I don’t know, Abin. We have to do something, but High Sen is a different country.”

“Not to me it isn’t.”

“I know, but for the moment we are supporting the King of Kend, whatever your feelings about borders.”

“How is he, Ferret?” Lena asked the healer.

“He will heal, and I will see to him properly later. Help me clean out that forge over there. We can move him in there, and I’ll leave you to look after him. I must go back and talk to the King urgently.”

“Can’t we use one of the houses?”

“Lena, they’ve not been cleaned out properly. Trust me, you don’t want to go into them.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“This is a horror that will be with us for a long time yet.”

“The dragons are going to go whether you do anything or not, Hornan; their riders too.”

“I would be invading a country!”

“I know, but what do I say?” Ferret frowned. “This sounds like another massacre in the making.”

Hornan sat down on his desk and punched the engraved oak top, one of the few items in the castle that displayed more than simple functionality. “If we didn’t have the dragons here, we would never have heard about this and probably couldn’t have done anything about it if we had.”

“But they are here and they are patrolling and looking out for people. Now they want to help people they regard as neighbours. Hornan, these dragons are young but they know the history of their own people better than you know yours, and this is what the Draig yr Anialr did in the Sand Hills. They helped the small villages and groups of nomads. They don’t see any difference between then and now.”

“But there is a difference, Ferret. They had hundreds of dragons, hundreds of riders, and infantry. Mab-Abin always calls what happened on the Eastern Plains a war; a long one! We have ten young dragons and ten very inexperienced riders.”

“Are you going to turn your back on Cothol?”

“Of course not!” Hornan snapped at the Ancient. He smiled ruefully. “I can’t do nothing; I know about it now. But this will not end here.”

“I will go and tell the dragons.”

“No, wait. Fetch Garron, Terran, Sovan, and Mab-Abin first. We cannot just storm up there, whatever you believe, Ferret.”

“Thank you, Hornan. They are outside already.” She smiled and left.

“Stop manipulating me!” Hornan shouted at the woman’s back. “Or at least don’t smile at me while you’re doing it,” he added to himself.

“So, are you all determined to go?” Hornan met the group of his senior officers, as he tried to think of them, behind the Burh on what was now called Pree’s Camp, following some history lessons from Mab-Abin. “Don’t answer that. Let me ask you a better question. Once you drive these men away, what happens next?”

“I would think that being driven off by dragons will make them think,” said Ferret.

"No, it won't. These sorts of men are thugs and bandits, even if they dress like soldiers and have military titles. Thugs and bandits don't think. Or learn lessons, before someone tries that one."

"True," said Terran. "They are more likely to come back with more people."

"An army?" asked the king. "I would if I was facing ten huge monsters, no offence, Mab-Abin."

"You don't have an army," pointed out the dragon. "You have a bunch of knights and a company of archers and infantry, no offence, king."

"Sire, High Sen is a third the size of Kend," said Garron. "They have no king, but a self-proclaimed Lord, who, if I've understood correctly, has just taken over from his father, and I doubt they have anything as organised as an army."

"We know they have ten men spare to send to a tiny village of two hundred people," said Terran. "If they have ten such groups that is a hundred and they probably have far more than that. You are right, it is a small country, but it's not tiny. Oben used to be a busy market town of four or five thousand people."

"Excuse me a moment," said Mab-Abin, and leapt into the air.

"Does he always do that?" asked Sovan.

"It's a flaw in dragon personalities," said Ferret with a smile. "They have a habit of doing the thing they just thought of. He will be back in a minute after he has dispatched a scout to Oben."

"How do you know he is doing that?"

"They are also blindingly obvious most of the time." Ferret raised an eyebrow. "I wish humans were more like that. Of course, some are." She smiled tolerantly at the king.

"How long before these men return to the village?" asked Hornan.

"Seven days today," replied the Ancient. "My instinct says they will either be on time or early, but not late."

"A day early would be my guess," said Terran. "They won't really be interested in taxes but will want whatever they can take. If we want more than dragons up there, we need to get moving."

"The one advantage we have is surprise," Hornan said. "They will have no idea the village has asked for help. I assume they know about the dragons by now. It's been six months."

"Siinland knows about our new friends, their traders have been asking about them," said Sovan. "Anyone we trade with locally will know by now. However, how many have seen one of them is a different question. I know that almost all the villagers who have met them have been shocked by how big they are. I think they were expecting a herd of winged horses."

"There are some that size," said Ferret. "Well?" she shouted over to Mab-Abin as he landed on the field and walked over to the group.

"I've sent three dragons and riders to check on Oben and as much of the rest of the country as they can. One will return here; the other two will meet the rest of the dragons at Farnen."

"I must get back there," said Ferret. "I have abandoned Lena there with the boy."

"You go," said the king. "Mab-Abin, take who you need. I will use the dragon who is returning here to keep this together. Terran, you and Garron get a company of knights and archers assembled and send them off to Cothol now."

"It's going to take them days to get up there," pointed out Terran.

"Hopefully, they won't be needed immediately, but I suspect they will by the time they get there. There are so many holes in this plan that it makes my head hurt."

“Are you sure this is the best way to do this?” Sir Terran was setting up camp in a clearing less than a league from the village of Cothol with Ferret, Mab-Abin, the other dragons and riders, and a handful of infantry. “Shouldn’t we just be in the village waiting for them?”

“We dragons learned a long time ago if you turn up in a village with a large armed group and say you are there to save them, they often think you might be worse than their enemy,” explained Mab-Abin. “In a land that has forgotten dragons, it might be even more of a problem.”

“So, actions first, explanations later?”

“Yep.”

“Well, we might be here for a couple of days, so let us make ourselves comfortable. How was the lad, Ferret? I noticed you moved him.”

“I’ve taken him to a nearby village for the moment. His broken bone is beginning to mend, with a little help, but he has damaged his leg and thigh muscles and is in a lot of pain. I don’t want to risk him on a dragon so we’ll bring him home by cart in a few days. We have to bring that old horse of his anyway. The poor old animal keeps falling asleep standing up.”

“I’m just going to check on our lookout,” said Mab-Abin. “I’ll be back later.”

They had found a small secluded spot much closer to the village and had stationed a dragon and rider there; the rider hiding in the trees watching out for the lieutenant and his men. They were also scouting south down the road from the village at high altitude, but with so much of the road running beneath the trees, they could easily miss any horsemen.

“If they turn up today, I’m going to have to leave both the infantry and the riders at the village for protection,” said Terran. “Garron and the archers and the knights are still a couple of days away. The rain has slowed them down.”

“I noticed your summers are on the damp side here,” commented Ferret dryly.

“All those years in your summer retreat have spoilt you, dear friend.”

“I like being spoilt occasionally.” Ferret unrolled the canvas she had taken from Mab-Abin. “Help me hang this between a couple of trees, will you?”

“The dragons don’t seem to mind staying out in the rain, I noticed,” said the knight as he helped erect the rough shelter.

“Oh, trust me, they hate it, but often they have no choice. Mab-Abin has a huge canvas he can use, but it’s heavy and he won’t carry it unless he must. You have only been up to his house a couple of times, but over the winter, when he had his fire going in there and his lamps, it was cosier than my cottage.”

“Anna likes your cottage.”

“And the dragon house,” said Ferret, laughing. “But I’m not letting her stay there as much as she would like. She has an isolationist streak in her, and I am not sure whether it’s because of her capture or because she was like that even before. I want her to mix with the other young people at the castle.”

“She is very shy. Pass me that rope over.” Terran pulled the canvas taught and tied it off.

“I know. Sweet though, and she loves Mab-Abin like mad. Not that he’s around much. Even I don’t get to see him enough.”

“Enough?”

“I was amazed last year how quickly we became inseparable. I couldn’t explain to you why. It’s nothing mystical or anything like that, it’s just, I don’t know, sharing? Like we each have something the other one needs.”

“Sovan has said the other riders are feeling that same connection,” commented Terran. “They are all very protective of each other as well. Though in a battle, that is not always a good thing.”

“How so?” They had finished the makeshift shelter and Ferret made up a small fire.

“You need to concentrate on attacking your enemy. If you spend all your time protecting those around you, you will endanger yourself. In the end, you will weaken your unit, not strengthen it.”

“You see, this is where I really am just a healer, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, you are so much more than that; no one is fooled!” The knight grinned broadly and threw over a small packet. “This is excellent tea. I like it strong if you are in the mood to brew. I will be back in a moment.” And he disappeared into the trees.

Ferret smiled. She had been avoiding Terran a bit. It was not that she didn’t like his company, very much the opposite, but all she could see ahead of her for the moment was their plans for the kingdom and the dragons, and those were complicated enough. She was also aware that Sir Terran was not the only person who was growing fond of her, and that was a bear-sized trap she had not expected. For the time being, she would keep Mab-Abin as number one male on her list; that was far simpler. Still, she could make the rather nice man a pot of tea, she supposed.

The forester heard the men’s horses approaching through the trees and picked up his axe. He had neither the money nor the goods to satisfy their demands and the villagers had nowhere else to go, so the men would want to take young girls and women. He would kill to stop that from happening, even though he would probably die himself. There had been no word from his son, but he was glad the boy was not here to see this. Some of the villagers had left, though they had only moved to nearby villages that were under the same threat.

The lieutenant rode out into the clearing along the forest track, his men spreading out behind him in a long line. He had twenty with him this time and they all had their swords drawn.

“Forester,” the man shouted over. “Have you my coin?”

“No.” The forester saw little point in trying to make excuses; the man was not interested.

“What goods have you for me?”

“We have only what you have seen already.”

“Then you do not have enough. I will take the price in people. Twenty girls and young women will suffice though I don’t know what you will do next year.”

“There will not be a next year, lieutenant,” said the forester. He hefted his large axe and held it in two hands.

“You would fight all these men with that?” sneered the lieutenant at the village elder.

“I might only take one of you, but I will take someone.”

“You stand alone. I see none of your villagers by your side.”

“They will fight when you try to take their daughters.”

“Really? They look like scared little rabbits to me! You, serfs of Cothol!” shouted the lieutenant, standing up in his stirrups. “You will have a choice shortly. You will either give up your women willingly, or we will kill them and you.” The man sat back down and smiled. “But first, we will deal with you, forester.”

The line of horses moved forward at a trot. The forester set himself firmly where he stood and raised his axe, grim determination etched on his face, his new scar still a raw line down his cheek. It was a brave, but futile gesture, and the lieutenant took a throwing knife from his belt

and threw it straight into the chest of the big man. The forester fell back onto the ground in shock, the life slowly draining from him into a puddle by his side. The lieutenant laughed at the pathetic villagers as he drew his sword and charged at them, death in his eyes.

Mab-Abin dived from the sky with a roar, snatched the lieutenant from his saddle, and broke the man's back. Behind him, from the trees, the dragons and riders swooped on the lieutenant's men, the riders firing arrows from their powerful longbows and the dragons throwing their spears. The horsemen raced in every direction in a desperate attempt to reach the trees, and the villagers bolted inside their poor cottages in fear. The fight lasted only minutes, and of the twenty horsemen, only five escaped into the woods. The rest were dead as were half of their horses.

When Mab-Abin landed, Ferret leapt off his back and ran to the forester who lay on the path, gasping for breath, and trying to sit up.

"Hold still," she commanded him, and put her hands on his chest, closing her eyes. But the man had lost too much blood, and she could do nothing. She used her skills to lessen his pain and looked into his eyes. "Are you Ben's father?" she asked him, seeing the cut on his face.

He nodded, weakly. "You found him?"

"He found us. He is why we are here."

"Is he here?"

"No, he was injured, but he will be alright. He is being looked after."

"Are you the king's men? From Kend?"

"Yes we are," replied Ferret, gently. His breathing had become soft and ragged, his lungs filling with his own blood.

"Thank you," he said in a whisper, and died.

Ferret closed the man's eyes and stood up, taking a long breath. Sir Terran walked up to the Ancient, while the infantry, who had been running through the woods to join them, checked the corpses of the lieutenant's men.

"Is he?" he asked.

"Yes. He's Ben's father. He is dead."

"Sorry, Ferret."

"We got here as fast as we could, and we only lost the one; I must be thankful for that, I suppose." Ferret walked to the middle of the circle of cottages and called to the villagers who had yet to emerge. For a moment, there was silence, but then an older woman walked cautiously from a rough cottage next to the forge.

"Are you from Kend?" she asked.

"Yes. The king sent us."

"And those?" The woman pointed at the dragons who were collecting the bodies of the men and horses and piling them up on the far side of the clearing.

"They are dragons. They are friends."

"How can they be friends?" asked the woman.

"You need to ask them. We came because they wanted to help you."

"How can I ask them?" The woman was frightened. "They are just beasts!"

"Come with me, mother." Ferret held out her hand. Hesitantly, the woman took the Ancient's hand and allowed herself to be walked towards the dragons.

When Sir Terran watched Ferret treat with people like this, he could see her many centuries unfold before him. It was nothing clever; she had just lived longer than anyone else and did this so much better than he ever could. As always, it left him confused. He pushed away the

annoying emotion and went to coax out the rest of the villagers, hopefully without scaring them further.

“Mab-Tenn,” called out Ferret. “Walk over to us!” The beautiful desert dragon left the grim pile of bodies and padded softly over to where Ferret stood with the scared woman.

“Yes, Eiferra?”

“What is your name, mother?” Ferret asked the woman.

“Jene,” replied the woman.

“Hello Jene,” said the young dragon, smiling. “Are you alright?” Dragons could always be trusted to keep it simple. Most of them, anyway.

“This girl,” said the woman, desperately trying to be brave. “She tells me you are friends.”

“Yes, we are friends. You looked like you needed some.”

“Thank you,” said the woman. “Yes, we did.”

“And they still do,” said Sir Terran the next day while they waited for their troops to catch up. Be-Aina had flown in to say they should be there by nightfall, and they were preparing a camping area ready for their arrival. “I wish I could read this so-called lord’s mind. I don’t suppose you have any tricks?” he asked Ferret, hopefully.

“None that help here, Terran,” she answered.

“From what little scouting the dragons and riders have done, this village is the last community before the border with Kend,” said Terran. When the horses get here, I’m going to send out some scouts to the nearest villages to find out whether they’ve had the same threat, if they have paid up, and so on. The villagers here think they might have done, but we may have already disrupted that process.”

“How long before those five who escaped report to someone?” asked Ferret.

“It depends on who they have to report to and where. It would help if we had a better map of the roads so the dragons could discover whether there are any military camps or small outposts, or whether everything is based in the capital. It’s only fifteen leagues to Oben. This really is a small country, but big enough if you are looking for a camp of men somewhere buried in the woods; half this place is trees.”

“It probably explains how it is run by this lord who sounds like a thane from my country in the old days.”

“Were they cruel?”

“Some were, yes. Others were more considerate of their people, but a system that allows a choice of being a good thane or not is not much of a system to live under, whichever way you cut it.”

“True enough, old one.”

“Be very careful, young knight.” Ferret waved her fingers like some wizened old witch.

“Here they come!” called out Fon, Mab-Suul’s rider, from the trail that led west out of the village. The villagers had been warned more troops were on their way to take over from the dragons, and they came out from their cottages to greet the new arrivals. The old woman walked over to Ferret and Sir Terran.

“Sir, lady, you have saved us, that is certain, but what happens now?”

“Madam, is there anyone in your village who knows the roads between here and Oben?” asked Sir Terran. “We need to find out more about this country so we can protect you. Five of the men escaped, so we believe they will return with more men.”

“Simmin is the man to speak to, sir,” answered Jene. “He is a hunter and he travels during the winter, but that is mostly into the northern forests. He trades his furs when he is able to use the horse. Ben took Jess, of course.”

“He’ll be back in a few days, I hope,” said Ferret to the woman. “And the horse. But you have eight good horses now and plenty of tack.”

“Don’t those belong to the lord?” asked the woman nervously.

“I think he forfeited them when he attacked you, Jene,” said Sir Terran. “We will help you build a corral for them while we are here. It’s not much for the life of your friend, but it’s something.”

“More than our lives are usually worth, sir. I will fetch Simmin for you.”

“It is so poor here, Terran. I don’t understand it,” said Ferret.

“What do you mean?”

“They don’t have a tavern, their crops are low quality, just planted around the clearing, they have a handful of cattle, a couple of pigs, and their houses are so simple. Half of them are one room with a fire in the middle. It is all so primitive compared with what I am used to.”

“Farnen was like this, Ferret, and so are many of the villages.”

“I know,” she said with a sigh. “I saw other similar places when I travelled through the south. Where I am from, though it is very poor, the villages are different. Admittedly, they are very old, dating from a time of rich duchies, but they have some sort of tavern, twice as many people living in them, and trade with other villages and a small market town somewhere.”

“We have had villages like this all my life, Ferret, and it looks old to me.”

“Mab-Abin says there was no village where Farnen is now. He knows because Sir Tannon, my mother’s first husband, had a battalion camped there. There were no large forests and there were lots of small hamlets of farmers grazing herds of all kinds. Most of the population was farther south, but it wasn’t anywhere like as poor. Where did they all go?”

“This is more of what you have said before, isn’t it? We are more primitive than we were.”

“I don’t mean you are as a people, please don’t think that. It’s more how you live and how little you have. More importantly, it’s how cut off communities are from one another and how little they are trading. Cothol is quite isolated and the difference between the villages and the towns is stark. Let’s hope this man Simmin is a little wiser about his small world.”

Chapter 14 – No Parley

Lena leant against the wall outside the tavern and played with her skirt. For the last six months, she had been living in riding leathers and though the skirt was cooler in the warm sun, it was also annoying. Two days she had been in Oben waiting to see whether there was going to be any reaction from the walled palace in the centre of the town. Like all countries in Preland, this had once been a Prelatehood. Though the prelate himself was centuries dead, the palace had been used by every ruler of one sort or another from the first mayor to the current Lord; a lad just seventeen years old, she had been told.

The one night spent in the tavern behind her had taught her far more than she had believed possible in one sitting. She and Be-Sula had come here on the orders of Mab-Abin with very simple instructions; talk to people, get a sense of this Lord, and if she saw more than ten soldiers heading their way, get out of there and tell them. Well, in the last two hours she had seen none leave, but she must have seen thirty or forty arrive, all in small groups and from different directions.

Oben was an ancient walled town, but the walls were crumbling now and the gates were unguarded. The houses were built close together like you often see in towns where people are reluctant to build outside the safety of the walls, and will keep filling in the gaps with ever narrower and taller structures. The town commerce, like many other places, revolved around the market held in the square in front of the palace. It was not very busy and the stalls were selling only basic produce; vegetables, skins, wooden furniture, and some simple metal goods made from the tin mined in the hills to the north of the capital.

The square this morning, much like the tavern last night, was full of people minding their own business, though if one more man offered her money for her services, she would probably throttle him. Lena had chatted to a couple of older woman and a barmaid over supper. She had pretended she was here prospecting trade for her father, and so could be as ignorant as she wished. The three had been happy to chat with her, and with a little lubrication, soon gave her chapter and verse about what they thought of the late, but unlamented old lord and his young, spoilt brat of a son.

“He is a right little sod,” Bellany, one of the older women had told her. “He struts around, surrounded by those men of his, all but waving his little prick at the girls thinking they will love him. But he is a fat and sour looking boy, that one. Evil I reckon.”

“The only way he gets to bed anyone is at the point of a knife,” Tally the barmaid had said. “I would rather run into it than have him on top of me!” She had laughed at her own joke, but there was no real humour; mostly fear and bitterness. They had all heard of girls who had been taken into the palace, but they were unsure what had happened to them.

“How many coins, love?” an old bloke asked Lena, rustling through his purse.

“I’m out here enjoying the sun, old man. Not selling!”

“Well, only asking.” He stomped away muttering something unflattering.

“You wouldn’t talk like that if my best friend was here,” said Lena under her breath. “Now, what is going on over there?” The large gates in the tatty wall of the palace squeaked open, and two ceremonial guards marched out and took up stations either side. “No one coming out or going in?” From somewhere inside she could just about hear distant, shouted commands, and then they appeared. Three abreast and led by a short, fat, young man perched on a grey Colny, rode the army of High Sen, or the nearest she had yet seen.

“Oh dear,” said Lena to herself. “There’re a lot of them!” Numbers were not her strong suit, but Be-Sula would do the maths if she could do the basic counting. She started counting rows. “Eight, nine, ten, eleven...” Each row was three abreast but she ignored that for the moment. “Thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three.” Still they came. From where she stood, she could see that though not well equipped, some were carrying bows and swords. “Forty-three, forty-four.... Forty-four and three abreast.” She committed the numbers to memory and turned to leave through the south gate.

“Three coins? I could afford three!” said the old bloke.

Lena punched him hard. “Pervert!” she snapped, stomping off down the lane, leaving a small group of people laughing at the surprised man sitting in the dirt.

“Quick, what is forty-four rows of soldiers each with three in?” Lena asked Be-Sula as she hitched up her skirt and jumped up on the dragons back, gasping for breath. She had just run half a league holding up the hem of her long skirt.

“One hundred and thirty-two.”

“That is how many are riding towards the north gate. Come on!”

“Are you getting changed first?”

“I’ll change in the air. Fly high over the town. I want to see if there are any soldiers left in the palace.”

“We might be seen.”

“Fly higher then; you have better eyesight than me anyway.”

The dragon flapped into the air and circled up over the woods, then turned and flew north over Oben.

“It looks empty.”

“Well that’s something. Now see if you can find the troops on the north road.”

The woods north of Oben were thick but the road was clear and they spotted the soldiers trotting along, still three abreast with the young man at their head.

“Who is that at the front? He doesn’t look much like a soldier.” All Draig yr Anialr had good eyesight but some females, like Be-Sula, seemed to have extra-keen vision.

“I’m not positive, but I think it’s Lord Fennelle Bin. He looks like what some women described to me last night.”

“We should get back to Cothol, then return to see whether they have turned on to the west road that leads to the village,” said the desert dragon.

“Let me get this top and skirt off first before you speed up. It’s like wearing a sail!”

The column of horses, travelling at a trot and walk, would not arrive at the village until the afternoon of the following day, but the dragon and the girl would be there in an hour. It was a speed of travel that Lena was becoming accustomed to, and she suffered bouts of frustration when ordered to go out scouting on horseback. For the moment, it was a beautiful day, the wind

on her skin was wonderful, and they were actually doing something that felt important; the rider was loving every moment.

“We can’t assume there are no other companies coming our way,” said Terran to Garron and Sovan having dismissed Lena and Be-Sula.

“No, we can’t,” agreed Garron. “What have we found out from other villages?”

“I have only heard back from four riders, so far,” replied the big Sovan. “Two villages had visits a week ago from what sounds like the same lieutenant, and they were given the same two-week deadline. One of the others had already had a return visit. They were breeding horses and were hoping that this year would see the village flourish for once, but the men took all the horses and burnt down three houses.”

“That’s terrible,” said Terran. “What about the last one?”

“They haven’t had a visit at all, but they are north of here and difficult to get to. They are half the size of this place and are poor beyond belief. I suspect the men couldn’t be bothered to go there, assuming they knew it existed. This region is even poorer than some of Kend.”

“Well it was interesting what Lena heard last night,” commented Terran. “Oben is not rich, but they seem to be trading south into Rissen. That is another small unstable country, and they were closely allied to High Sen at one point. You know, our knowledge of our neighbours is dreadful.”

“Are they friends enough to send troops to help this Lord?” asked Sovan.

“I don’t know. They are always arguing with Siinland and there are constant border problems in the south. They may not be able to.”

“This is going to be a fight, whatever happens, and I’m worried about the villagers.”

“Me too. To start with, get all the dragons out scouting, Sovan. We must know if the column gains weight on the journey and work out when they will be here. Garron, come with me. I think we better move the villagers out into the woods. They can camp at the clearing we used when we first arrived.”

When the dragon scouts returned, they confirmed the column of horses was definitely travelling in their direction and had been joined by another hundred horsemen coming down from the mines.

“We must force them into a standoff,” said Mab-Abin to Sir Terran.

“Why?”

“You outnumber them, just, but you both use longbows and you have fewer troops on horses. I want to reduce the number of casualties on your side so I would like to use some of our old tactics, but it helps if they’re not running around too much.”

“What will you do?”

“Drop bags of rocks on them.”

“That works?” The knight blinked in amazement.

“It works better when they are charged with desert fire, but it might not be a good idea when we’re all in the same forest. That and you don’t have any.”

“I haven’t heard of it.”

“Anyway, the dragons and riders are making up bags now, and we will collect rocks north of here. We might be tight for time,” said the dragon, looking concerned.

“How do you use them?” asked Terran.

They now had the village to themselves since the villagers had taken the troop's tents and left for the clearing a league west through the forest.

"We sometimes put one huge boulder into the bag and drop it on any carts or catapults, or we fill the bag with lots of small rocks the size of your two fists, and empty them onto the soldiers. If we can find chipped flint, it's better still. We will use that method here."

"How high do you drop them from?"

"It depends. From a hundred feet, the small rocks tend to spread out when we drop them so have quite a broad reach, but we drop from lower if we want to hit something specific or want them flying in at an angle. We haven't got time to get properly organised, so we can only do one run, but they won't be expecting it and it will cause panic. As Hornan pointed out, these are thugs and they will not regroup like properly trained cavalry would."

"I think we can work with that," said Sir Terran with a grin. "I'm hoping that our archers are better trained than theirs, but I am not relying on anything."

"We always knew far more about our enemy than we do here," commented Mab-Abin. "We should talk about how we collect better intelligence."

"I agree, but let's win this one first, Abin."

As they flew high over the forests of High Sen, the feeling this was all rushed and unplanned was worrying Ferret. The entire force from Oben, as far as they could make out, was riding up the road straight for them like they were out on parade. She was no military commander, but it sounded all wrong.

"Either they are mad, or we are missing something," said the Ancient to Mab-Abin.

The dragon turned his head to look at her. "If this was Farthing coming up the road, that column of horses would be Sir Tannon, all polished up and making as much noise as possible, while Martin and Doritha were slipping through the trees unnoticed."

"Are we sure they are not doing something similar?" asked Ferret.

"No, we are not, but we have seen no signs of any other companies."

"What can we do to be sure?"

"There is nothing I can do, Eiferra, but this is something you can do."

"I have only done it finding the children at the hunting lodge and that was just a building; I nearly collapsed."

"Eafa used to pass out for hours, sometimes a day or two, but you don't need to try to be that exact, I think. Hang on, I am going to land on that rise."

The dragon glided down to a small hill a league or so from where the High Sen force was camping for the night. Although the existence of dragons was now no secret, he was keen not to advertise their presence too much. During the war with the Haftens, the dragons had made a big difference to the scouting, but Tekkinmod had gone to a lot of trouble to hide things from their view, which had left holes in their knowledge. Some of those Weasel had been able to fill with his peculiar abilities, now inherited by his daughter.

"I'm not sure I can do this, Mab-Abin."

"Sovan and I have been trying to improve the scouting, but we are both aware that we are so short of information about the region that we guess half of the time. For the moment, scouting is our strongest weapon, but we need help that only you can give."

"What do I look for?"

"I only spoke to Eafa a couple of times about this, but he talked about the similarities between soldiers and trees; lots of them grouped together. Then he would concentrate on

everything that wasn't a tree. He knew that would include rabbits, deer, wild boar, and other creatures, but that didn't matter since there are relatively few of those. If he found a large group of things that were not trees, then he would guess they were soldiers."

"You make it sound so easy."

"Isn't it?"

"No!" Ferret looked suddenly so much younger than even her apparent age, and with her big, brown eyes looking up at him, Mab-Abin just grinned. "What?"

"Sorry, dragon girl, you reminded me of someone for a moment. I'm here to watch out for you if you pass out. Have you any alcohol on you?"

"No, why?"

"Nothing. Just something I remembered."

"Alright, Abin; I will try. Where should I look?"

"If Ben Lowen and Martin had planned this, the irregulars would be camped much closer to the village than the cavalry and would arrive earlier and wait. That means they might still be on the move since the Lord of High Sen's cavalry has camped rather early." Mab-Abin scraped away some thin grass on the hillock and sketched out a rough map with a claw.

"Is this the right way around to how we are sitting?" Ferret asked him.

"No, sorry." He rubbed it out with his hand and started again. "This is very rough and not properly to scale. We will get this more organised, I promise, Eiferra."

"I know. Farthing had to learn too and so did Pree; I'm sure I can."

"The road from Oben heads north for three leagues, then it turns east for about eight or nine leagues, then it turns north again up to Cothol. The cavalry is camped on that turn, just about. That is south-west from where we are on this rise. If their infantry has followed the road too, then they are either a couple of leagues behind the cavalry camp, so directly south of our position, or they are ahead, so directly west."

Ferret looked at the map carefully. "I am going to try to find the cavalry first. I know they are there, so I want to understand what they feel like. You keep thinking about where I should look for the infantry."

This all felt very strange, Ferret mused as she dipped into the shadows in her mind. The hunting lodge had been a very solid entity that she could touch and work her way around, but even sitting on this hill, she felt disconnected like she was floating in the breeze. It was making her feel sick, which was the last thing she wanted. As soon as she tried to feel outwards in front of her, she realised her mistake and snapped herself back to reality.

"I need rock!"

"What?" She had startled the dragon who had been staring at his dirt map.

"I need to be touching rock. Otherwise, it's like sitting on a boat."

"Oh, alright." The dragon leapt into the air and hovered briefly, then landed again. "About two hundred paces that way. Some rocks are pushing up through the trees. I assume you need something bigger than just a boulder."

"A boulder might just be sitting on lots of dirt so that wouldn't help."

"Can you remember this map?"

"Yes, I think I can." Ferret climbed up on the dragon's back and he flapped the short distance, landing on the rocks.

"Better view from here too. I need to get cleverer at getting you what you need," said Mab-Abin with a sigh.

"What's wrong, Abin?"

"I talk about the war as if it was yesterday, but it wasn't; it was centuries ago. I have forgotten so much and it keeps coming back in bits."

"Mab-Abin, your knowledge is incredible and you are changing the way everyone is thinking, not just about dragons. Bits is fine. It's a hundred times better than I have otherwise."

Ferret found a comfortable place on the rocks, faced south-west and closed her eyes. The seasickness she had experienced earlier was gone and she felt more grounded. She giggled and told herself off for her silly joke. She was a little surprised how easy it was for her to get a general sense of the landscape, a sort of rough sketch with no details, though it flickered and waved annoyingly. She assumed this was something to do with the air which was, after all, part of the scene, even if she could not usually see it. She tried to brush the air away and immediately her head began to ache. That wasn't good. Ferret put the scene back the way it was and left the air alone. Part of the problem, she realised, was she was removing the air from everywhere in front of her, for leagues and leagues. That made sense. When she had been creating the picture of the hunting lodge, she had dismissed areas that she did not need first. She would do the same thing now and ignore the air.

The Ancient knew the Lord of High Sen's cavalry was camped ahead of her on either side of the road in a shallow valley. She moved slowly through her rough scene until she found an area that had the right sort of shape to it. Now, very carefully, she tried to remove anything that she understood. Trees were the first to go because there were lots of them and they were difficult to hold on to. This finding trick would be of little use to a forester then. Trees removed, Ferret wondered what else needed to go. From what Mab-Abin had said, animals could be left unless you were trying to find someone in a herd of cows, but other objects might confuse her picture like bushes, shrubs, stray piles of rocks and so on. Methodically, Ferret removed everything that she was certain was not a horse or human till she had... Nothing? That couldn't be right! She was getting tired so this was no good. She must try again. Pulling back a short way from her scene she decided to take in a broader view. Oh.

It was a shadow world, she told herself while moving her perspective, and it was not easy to tell one place from another. Weasel had tended to choose high hills and mountains and now she knew why; from low down it was hard to find your way around and she was simply in the wrong valley. She tried again.

"I found the cavalry!" she announced with some triumph to Mab-Abin. "I now know what I'm looking for. Pass me that water and I'll see if I can find any infantry."

The dragon smiled at her with evident pleasure. "Now we are offering something genuinely unique," he said. "No finder could do what you just did. This is something only Ancients can do."

"Well, I hope I'm doing it right."

For the next half an hour, Ferret unfolded larger and larger areas of her shadowy map but could find nothing that even remotely resembled the cavalry camp, though she did find their own troops at the village on the far edge of her little world. She realised how subtle the differences were between the troops and the forest. Trees were still living things, if not running up and down. When she returned to reality, her head was spinning and aching fiercely.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing at all," she said. "I hope that's a good thing."

"Well, the fewer we have to battle, the better. Though it makes them sound even more incompetent. Either that or they really do not realise what they are facing." The dragon casually stroked his friend's hair as he looked down at the rocks.

"You are thinking about something; I can hear you." said Ferret, twisting her mouth.

"You can't!"

"Well, alright, not hear, but I always know when you are playing with a puzzle. What is it?" Ferret was close to falling asleep. When she had emerged from her world, she had been amazed how strong she had still felt, but that was now quickly draining away and she was weak and listless.

"We are assuming they would be coming from the same direction as the cavalry."

Ferret chewed on her lip thoughtfully. "I need to turn around. Why did you ask about alcohol? Because I really could do with a drink about now."

"Someone help me!" Mab-Abin came crashing down into the middle of the village clutching the unconscious form of Ferret tightly in his arms.

"What has happened?" Lena rushed over with Be-Sula right behind her.

"I will explain, but take Eiferra and lie her down somewhere."

"Is she alright?" asked the young dragon.

"She will be. She just needs to rest. Where is Sir Terran?"

"I'm behind you. What's happening, Mab-Abin?"

"They have infantry. They are coming in from the west."

Terran called over to Garron and Sovan, and told a soldier to fetch the map.

"How do you know?"

"Eiferra. She has been able to do what Weasel could do and has found them using her skills."

"Why is she unconscious?" The knight was obviously worried.

"It's very hard to do. Weasel could be out for two days sometimes. As she has said before, this is not like a fairy waving a wand. Where is that map?"

"Here, sir!" The young recruit ran over and laid the map on the ground, holding it flat.

"Turn it round so it's orientated correctly, lad," ordered Sovan, looking over the young soldier's head.

"Sir."

"Now," muttered Mab-Abin. "We didn't have a map with us, but I'm pretty sure I have worked out where she thought they were." He pointed to an area on the map. "They are camped somewhere around here, less than two leagues east of us."

"Very dense forest there," commented Terran. "I still don't understand how she can see them."

"I'll get her to explain later. She thought there were about two hundred of them but we have no idea how they are armed."

"This puts us at a terrible disadvantage," said Garron. "And now they outnumber us. Unless they come out of the woods and face us, they have the cover of the trees. I suspect they are meant to be the ambush, so I can't see them doing that."

"I think you are right," replied Mab-Abin. "And the trees will protect them from us dragons too."

"How would the dragons have dealt with this in the wars?" Terran asked Mab-Abin.

"Dragons aren't much help in this situation. We only had this happen once, that I know about, but I wasn't there. It was at the first battle at Cullin Falls. Tekkinmod sent an ambush through the woods, but they were not well trained. Ben Lowen had dug a deep ditch and hid the

soldiers in there, and when the Haftens attacked at dawn, he surprised the ambushers. Later, we would have used blackdust and incendiaries and set fire to the forest around them.”

“We will only have whatever lamp oil they have here. I doubt it’s much,” said Garron.

“Maybe not, but perhaps it doesn’t need to be quite so dramatic,” said Sovan thoughtfully.

“Yes?” Terran prompted.

“We might not be able to burn them out, but we could probably smoke them out. We’ve had a few days of rain, but we had a lot of dry weather before that, and the woods are dry beneath the canopy. We could still light fires and the wet leaves would create smoke; that would make their lives miserable.”

“Tonight,” said Mab-Abin.

“It has to be,” said Terran, nodding. “Twenty or thirty soldiers, whatever oil and anything else that will burn quickly. The wind is blowing from the west, which is perfect.”

Sovan and Garron nodded their agreement.

“Fine, you two sort it out. Mab-Abin, do you think you could get a better fix on them?”

“I’ll try. It might take me a while. I suggest you see how Eiferra is.”

“Why?”

The dragon moved away from the small group so he could stretch out his wings. “Well, she might not be too bad. If she’s awake, she really can see in the dark.”

“Are you sure you are up to doing this?” Sir Terran realised he sounded more worried than he intended.

“I am not entirely, to be honest,” replied Ferret, buttoning up her leathers and hanging her short bow on her back. She normally preferred the longbow, but in dense forest, it could be more of a liability than a help, and tangle in every other stray twig or branch the trees and bushes pushed in her direction. “But the dear dragon is right; this will be a lot easier with me leading.”

“How do you do it?” Some people might just be able to accept the Ancient’s quirky abilities, but Terran found himself constantly puzzled by them. In some ways, he wished she didn’t have them; they just put her in more danger than he was happy about. He suppressed the foolish thought which would earn him no respect from the fiercely egalitarian woman.

“One night we will get very drunk and I will try to explain.”

“Why drunk?”

“Sounds like as good an excuse as any. I doubt I am going to find any way to explain it that makes sense to me, let alone someone else, so we might as well enjoy it.”

“You have a very strange way of looking at things sometimes.”

“Mab-Abin says I have inherited more from my father than I realise. I’m not sure it’s a compliment.”

Ferret was taking a risk agreeing to join this night-time foray. Her head still ached and the blackjaw leaves she had used to numb the pain had done nothing. But they were now leaving later than they would have without her, so she couldn’t back out.

“Remember, I cannot warn you of every twig or rock I find, so you will still have to be careful. We have some moonlight between the clouds so it will not be pitch-dark.”

“Will it be like daylight to you?” asked Garron. He was leading the squad of twenty men and women and would take over once they were within reach of the ambushers.

“No, it’s like walking through a mist and I can’t make out small details like faces, so I have to be careful too. I have never led anyone before in this way, but I will try to warn you of any obstacles.”

The twenty were all experienced scouts and trackers and had been chosen for their ability to move through woodland quietly. Ferret, as much as possible, kept to the natural paths that form between trees, but this was a hilly region, and when negotiating the larger trees on some of the slopes, she had to stop the squad falling over large roots and protruding rocks. After more than an hour of slow progress, the ancient called a halt.

“Garron, I’m going ahead on my own from here so I can find the camp, then I will come back and fetch you. I think it will be easier.”

“I agree. We are slowing you down though it would have been impossible without you. It’s too dark in here.”

“I won’t be long, I hope.”

On her own and with a little concentration, Ferret sped up to a trot. To those without her advantages, the forest might seem dense and impenetrable in the dark, but much of it was relatively open. To her surprise, she was a lot closer to the ambushers than she had thought, and she nearly stumbled straight into their camp. The trick she used to see in the dark was similar to finding, but because she was not trying to make sense of the shadows and only make her way through them, it wasn’t anything like as tiring. But following her earlier trip into this shadow world, it was making her headache worse. The troops were not properly camped, unsurprisingly, but just scattered around and between the trees, lying on the ground in full uniform with their jackets pulled over them. It was very peaceful, and there were only one or two guards leant up against trees, yawning. She had seen enough, and slipped back through the forest, making sure of her route.

“How close?” asked Garron when she returned.

“Less than half a league. How close do you need to be?”

“Not on top of them. We don’t want them to become aware of the fires too quickly or they might be able to put them out. Are they within a valley as Mab-Abin thought?”

“I can’t see clearly enough like this, but I think so. It’s a very shallow valley, I suspect.”

“It will still help. Take us halfway and then we can spread ourselves out. We will need you to wait so we can all find our way back to you.”

The timing was not critical like some of Martin and Doritha’s missions had been, but they could not afford to hang around either. From where Ferret waited, the twenty scouts spread out north and south, thirty paces apart, and started fires with the contents of their packs. They had managed to squeeze out every last drop of lamp oil from the village and each had a small bottle plus plenty of straw and tinder in their packs. Ferret admitted that she often had enough trouble lighting her fire back in her cottage first time and was duly impressed how quickly the scouts lit and established their fires before rejoining her.

“That is everyone,” whispered Garron. “Light the last fire, Bernan.”

“Sir.”

“Will this work?” asked Ferret.

“I hope so. I have never tried before, to be honest.” Garron looked up and down through the trees. “The fires are getting going quickly, we better make our way back.”

“Follow me then.” Ferret worked her way towards the village, Garron and the scouts close behind, as the smell of burning ash, beech and maple drifted through the forest. It was past midnight when they emerged from the trees into the flickering light of four large campfires.

“Well, that has to have achieved something,” said Sir Terran, pointing back over their heads to where a faint glow was beginning to show against the low clouds. “It has lit a lot better than I thought it would.”

“I hope it doesn’t rain,” muttered Garron. The skies had been clearer when they had left.

“Even if it does, they are going to be a lot more worried come morning, I would guess,” said Ferret. “Have we set fire to a sufficiently broad stretch of the forest?”

“From here it looks like you have, but we prepare like we had done nothing,” insisted Terran. “And we take any advantage as a gift.”

“Good advice, but I am still going to wake up a couple of dragons to check,” said Ferret, rubbing her head as she went to find Mab-Abin, who, predictably, was already waiting for her.

“She’s exhausted,” said Garron. “We need to watch her.”

“She is not good at saying no, and she has been using her skills a lot over the last week or more. She did more than just splint that boy’s leg in Farnen, and healing bone takes it out of her.”

“Where are we going with all this, Terran?” asked Garron, a puzzled look on his face. “What is going to happen?”

“I’m not sure,” replied the knight. “I admit I’m caught up with her dreams and ideas, possibly more so than Hornan. And when Mab-Abin talks about what they hoped for but never achieved all those years ago, he makes me stop and think. But it hasn’t been real, not until now.”

“I know,” said Garron. “Farnen was horrendous, but it was the act of a thug and a slaver. This is the act of a ruler. I think I’m with Mab-Abin on this; borders are irrelevant sometimes.”

“True, but they are also a reality. I am happy to protect people, Garron, but I don’t want to be their conqueror.” Three shadows blew over the two men like a small wind and flew across the forest. “And I still have no idea what to think about that; either the dragons or those of our own who have become their riders. It is beyond anything I have ever known.”

The fire was stopped short from engulfing the forest around the valley by torrential rains just after dawn. Ferret and Mab-Abin had sent the other two dragons back to rest. All the Draig yr Anialr needed to conserve their strength for the attack the next day, and for the large bags of rocks that waited for them on a hill to the north. Mab-Abin could not determine where the infantry had fled, but where they had camped was now a burnt-out ruin of blackened trees and smoking and steaming undergrowth. Ferret knew they had no choice but for her to sit on another rocky hill and try to find the infantry one more time. As she came to, lying on the ground, she looked up into the large concerned eyes and felt the dragon stroke her head gently.

“I think I’m ill,” she said with a weak smile.

“I think so too, dear friend,” said the dragon, smiling. “Did you find them?”

“Some of them. They are making their way down towards the road, probably to meet the cavalry, but they are not in one group; they are scattered all over the place.”

“Any others?”

“I think one group were going east, but it all became very blurry.” Ferret’s eyes were red and watery, and she suddenly rolled onto her side and wretched.

“You have to climb up on my back, little dragon,” said Mab-Abin, pulling a face.

“Bad idea, Abin. I think I might fall off. I’m going to be useless for the next few hours. Just pass me that rug you carry and come back for me later.”

“Are you sure? It’s beginning to rain again.” Mab-Abin looked sideways at the woman whose eyes were firmly closed. “Eiferra? Ferret?” He grinned. “Runs in the family,

apparently. Good thing we all love you.” Smiling fondly at a distant memory of an unconscious Weasel, the dragon pulled the rug over the beautiful woman, so like her mother, left her some food and water, and then sheltered her with a canvas hung from gorse bushes and rocks. Telling his rider to sleep well, he leapt into the air and flew quickly to meet the flight of dragons and riders.

A small woman slipped out from behind a tree, knelt down, ran her hand through Ferrets hair, and smiled. “Just like your father, you know. He would be so proud of you. I know I am.” She adjusted the canvas so it did a proper job of keeping the woman dry, and chuckled. “Lovely boy, but useless with tents. I really hate rain!” The woman jumped from the rock and disappeared quietly back into the forest to find her strawberry roan horse.

Fennelle Bin, the seventeen-year-old Grand Lord of High Sen, galloped into the large village clearing and pulled his horse to an arrogant halt. With an indistinct wave of his podgy hand, he commanded his valiant cavalry to make three lines behind him and draw their swords ready for the bloody charge. There would be no parley. His father had been a weak man, more interested in deals and alliances than with the power of a proper ruler. Muscle; that is how the rule of law and blood was enforced, and the young, sneering man would see people fall to their faces and wail in his presence if that was needed. At a shouted command, the lines moved forward twenty paces, parting slightly to go around their Lord who was now safely behind the charge.

Ahead, and the reason for the delay, stood the lines of Kenden archers, knights, and infantry. Young Fennelle Bin smiled and accidentally giggled. This was his moment. These interlopers, these despoilers of his fair people, his slaves, understood so little. In just a few moments, those that were not crushed beneath the feet of his horses would be hacked to pathetic shreds by his brave soldiers when they rushed out in ambush from the trees.

“Sound the charge, Captain,” squeaked Fennel Bin, Grand Lord of High Sen, in his high-pitched voice.

“Yes, Grand Lord! Cavalry, raise swords!” The lines of fierce horsemen raised their cruel weapons and pointed them at their enemy.

“Charge!”

Fennel Bin, Grand Lord of High Sen, never saw what happened next. The entire contents of Mab-Abin’s bag of extra-large rocks knocked him clean off his horse and crushed him to death, face down in the wet dirt.

“Fire!” Garron ordered his archers, and wave after wave of arrows soared through the air in a high arc of death to rain down on the panicking horses at the far end of the clearing. These were not knights, not even trained cavalry on military war horses. These were tough men put into rough uniforms, plonked onto big animals, and told to look angry. When the ten bags of rocks and gravel were released by the dragons, their contents scattering like a deadly hail onto the heads of men and horses, the lines broke. Horses bolted, men dropped swords, others fought to unstrap their bows, and different lieutenants shouted contradictory commands and called for help from an infantry that was not there. Earlier, when the remnants of the infantry had chased up the road trying to catch up with the cavalry, the dragons, returning with their rocks, had landed in the road, and roared at them, scattering them back into the trees.

“Forward!” Sir Terran commanded the knights, who lowered their lances and walked their horses slowly but resolutely up from the village, smoothly changing from a column to a long line across the clearing. Over their heads, the arrows continued to fly into the Grand Lord’s cavalry, and the dragon riders fired from above while the dragons howled in defiance, driving the horses

below wild with fear. By the time the knights broke into their thundering charge, there was little fight left, and they ran down the survivors in minutes. The blood flowed down the muddy slope of the clearing, driven by the battering rain, and washed into the small river to be taken from the village.

Sir Terran pulled his horse up next to Garron and jumped off.

“Two.”

“Two?”

“Just two,” confirmed Terran. “Thirty of the knights have injuries, but nothing terrible, and we only lost two. I can’t believe it.”

“And I can’t believe that! Come on!” Garron ran over to Mab-Abin who had landed with a crash, and was wobbling with exhaustion, holding himself up with his wings. As they reached him, he sat down with a thump and shook his head.

“What’s the problem? Mab-Abin!” Terran shouted up at the squinting dragon.

“Problem? Other than I haven’t slept in two days? Or that I carried a double-sized bag of rocks to flatten that little git? Or perhaps that I spent the entire night flying an Ancient backwards and forwards over the forest? No, no problems!”

“You crazy dragon!” said Terran, laughing. “And where is Ferret?”

“Passed out on a hill. She found the ambushers and the dragons scared them off on the way here.”

“Which hill, Mab-Abin?”

“I will go and get her.” The dragon tried to stand and slipped on the mud.

“Be-Aina!” shouted Terran to a young dragon who hopped and glided over to them. “Can you take me to get Ferret? This dragon’s not going anywhere.”

The young dragon looked at the big but knackered Mab-Abin and laughed. “Where is she, boss?” she asked.

“On that ridge we flew over with the rocks; that way about two leagues.” He pointed weakly with a wing.

“I know the one. Come on Terran. Have you ridden yet?”

“Not properly, no.”

“Well, I haven’t the energy to do any aerobatics anyway.”

Sir Terran packed up Ferret’s makeshift camp and put it in Be-Aina’s bag, then scooped up the small unconscious woman and climbed carefully onto the dragon’s back. As the dragon flew back to the village in a long glide through the rain, the knight held Ferret tightly while she nestled into him in her sleep. He desperately tried not to enjoy the moment too much.

“Who are you sending, girl?”

“That brother and sister team.”

“Why?”

“They are the only dragons I have ever managed to get to lie half convincingly without going red or looking like they are going to pop.”

“We dragons don’t go pop! Is Bell-Sendinar laughing at me?”

“You know he loves you, Snowy. But yes, he is.”

“So when are you sending them?”

“They will train up some young dragons first. A year, probably.”

"Where are you sending them to?"

"Well, one you can guess."

"The Ancient?"

"Yes. Or her mother."

"What do you know about her?"

"Almost nothing. I haven't dared go close. I am worried she will sense me."

"You are playing games like that bloody old man."

"I know I am, but I know why he played them now. I know why they all played them. She worries me, though. She has never been to the Abbey. I would have thought that was irresistible for the daughter of Eafa. The only thing I am sure about is she is alive because the big chap here knows she is, but don't ask me how."

"So, just to her?"

"No. Like we said, we need change in both continents, so I am sending one of them to Bind."

"Who to?"

"Someone I have been watching for a few years. Someone very precious. Stop looking at me like that!"

"Of all the young ones back then, you were always the one who wanted to look after everyone, wanted to keep the family together. You haven't changed."

Chapter 15 – The Trophy

“This is going to take some explaining, I suppose,” said Silvi as she and Tellor pushed in through the door of the Old Man of the Plains Inn, just near the market square in Given.

“Why are we doing this again? Apart from calming my nerves.”

“You have been up loads of times in the last few months, Tellor, you must be getting used to it by now.”

“Sort of, with other dragons. But Be-Elin insists on doing stupid things every time I ride with you; she just likes scaring me.”

“I will buy, then,” said Silvi, chuckling. “What do you want to drink?”

“Beer. Any beer in any sort of pot, just lots of it.”

“Are you planning to lose this afternoon, then?”

“No! So, back to what I was asking. Why are we coming in here caps in hands?”

“Because she nearly killed someone when she was last in here. Silvi!”

“Berron. And I am so sorry.”

“You do this in a lot of taverns, don’t you,” mused Tellor.

“Only the two! Berron, this is Tellor. A local I believe.”

“A bit down the road, but not far away. Pleased to meet you Berron. So, who did she try to kill?”

“Two lads decided the way you get friendly with women involves assaulting them. She objected.”

“She has good reasons. Are they alive?”

Berron frowned at Tellor to see if he was cracking some tasteless joke and was surprised to see the man was deadly serious. “Er, yes, they are. Well, they were when we sent them to Riena to be tried. I believe they are locked up now.”

“Good,” said Silvi. “Can we drop that subject?”

“Of course, and beer is on me,” replied the landlord, smiling broadly. “What is it you want to explain, other than the note you left me? Though, as far as I have heard, the explanation flew in several months ago.”

“That’s true,” said Silvi, laughing. “But I wanted to say that I knew all those old stories were true more or less even before then.”

“How?”

“The dragon that is currently scaring your local kids on the common has been teaching me about your ancestors. Do you know any of their names? Because if you do, you can ask and see if she remembers them.”

“Remembers?”

“She remembers mine,” said Tellor to the landlord. “Gellin and Feline. She has been able to tell me so much about them, and it’s incredible.”

"But how can she?" Berron shook his head in bafflement.

"She is nearly six, er, over five hundred years old, Berron," said Silvi with a mischievous smile, remembering that Be-Elin could sometimes be funny about her age. "Dragons live a long time."

"I think I need to sit down."

"She has that effect on many people," said Tellor wisely. "The dragon does too."

"Oi!"

Berron smiled at the two of them from the stool he had found himself. "I am glad, you know."

"What about?" asked Silvi.

"That you have found what you were looking for, and that you are what I hoped you were."

"What's that?"

"A rider, of course." He tapped his bar. "This place needs a bit of hope and people like you, like whoever my distant ancestors were."

"Oh, yes, that is the other thing. Your tavern."

"This place? This is ancient."

"As is its name. It's named for the riders' tavern in Ponack, the Hen-Thyn, which means The Old Man."

"Oh, so they called this the Old man of the Plains. That is rather special! I would love to know more about the original."

"It's a ruin now, sadly, but it has a huge terrace outside where the dragons used to gather; they like beer too. I think it's no coincidence you have a terrace out the front here, if somewhat smaller. Have you seen that girl and her father again?"

"Fin and Lvin? No, I haven't. That was the first time they had been up here for years. They are from many leagues away. She was very upset you left early, Silvi."

"I'm sorry. I had to be so very careful. It is still complicated."

"I get that," said Berron with a smile. "Are you involved with this shooting competition?"

"The heroes of the show!" said Tellor dramatically.

Berron laughed. "Well, girl, if you can shoot a bow like you can fight, then I am not surprised. I have to run this place today as we are going to be packed, but come back and tell me if you won or not, will you?"

"I will, Berron," replied Silvi, smiling. "Now give this man your strongest beer; I need all the help this afternoon I can get."

"Damn, that is loud!" Sir Nolenn shook his head and stamped his foot to stop his brain rattling inside his skull.

"Well, sir, I did say to put your hands over your ears." The small, leather-clad man with a bowl-like mop of the blackest hair looked annoyed. "And the noise is the point with this one."

"This one?"

"I have five to show you."

"Wonderful. Anything for a headache?" Nolenn and Mab-Horin had flown up to the capital Riena to leave a report for the King on the progress of training the men and women they had so far recruited at the small fairs they had been holding in villages and towns all over Hertenesse. They were still short of recruits, and wanted to increase pressure on the towns since most had come from smaller villages who felt more vulnerable. Now Nolenn was in the Dondor

Mountains near the mines, and Messin, the nearest they had to a blackdust expert, was showing the results of his experiments based on Be-Elin's sketchy information.

"It has taken me a couple of months to get this right," the small man was explaining. "The Lady Dragon's memory is not perfect, she admits to not understanding much about it all, and the names she used for some of the ingredients have changed over the years. Made it complicated."

"Are you close to what she described?"

"I think so, though they were either using bigger quantities or I am not getting it quite right. I am doing a lot of damage but not as much as I had hoped."

"Oh, that's disappointing."

"I might be being over-optimistic, Sir Nolenn. I really do not have anything to compare it to. Anyway, I have managed to work out their incendiaries and the recipe for desert fire."

"How did you do that? I thought she didn't know how it was made."

"Be-Elin knew part of it, and I guessed the rest. I think mine might not be as sticky, but see for yourself."

Messin took the knight over to a very rough, small shed.

"What was this used for? It looks like it's falling down."

"That's because we only just put it up. Unless you want a long walk down the hill and risk a forest fire, bearing in mind it is summer, I needed something to set light to. So, this is what that man Weasel invented. Silly name." Messin picked up a strange square terracotta bottle. "This has two chambers in it. The top one is full of the desert fire. It is oily and burns very hot. It is actually quite hard to light, so it is no good for a lamp. You need a fiercely burning torch to light it usually. The small bottom chamber has a rag ball of the blackdust in it. This recipe gives out a lot of heat and flame briefly. When it explodes, it ignites the desert fire and sprays it everywhere. Let me demonstrate. Step back, Sir Nolenn. No, much farther than that."

Nolenn moved to stand behind a big rock. The small man lit the fuse and ran to join him.

"Getting the timing right is--"

The flask exploded before he finished speaking, and the wall of the shed was instantly alight and burning fiercely.

"Oh, my knackered old horse!" Nolenn looked shocked and then broke into a smile. "That is incredible."

"I need to get those fuses better."

"What happens if you want the flame, or oil, to go somewhere else?"

"I'm playing with shapes of flasks. The Lady Dragon said they had some that threw the desert fire straight up. They used it in forests to set light to trees. Their bigger charges sent the flame up to forty feet high."

"I want some of those!"

"As soon as I get the shape right, I will have them made. I have fifty of these others ready for you which you can collect."

"The dragons can bring them," said Sir Nolenn with a smile.

"I doubt it unless it's a real emergency," said Messin, chuckling. "Apparently, they are very fussy about that. Personally, I don't blame them."

"Why?"

"I will show you," said the man, laughing.

Messin opened a wooden box stuffed full of straw and pulled out a small terracotta ball.

"Throw this as hard and far as you can."

"Anywhere?"

“Well, into the middle of the quarry would be good.” They were in a small quarry that had been abandoned for some years but had taken on a new lethal role as Messin’s explosives laboratory.

“Don’t I need to light it?”

“Just throw.”

Sir Nolenn threw the ball high and long, and right at the last moment noticed that Messin had his hands over his ears.

“Damn!” He slammed his own over his ears just as the ball landed and exploded with a painful crack.

“It doesn’t cause much damage, but throw those into a cavalry charge and I would imagine it would be quite something. I understand Pree’s Army used precisely that tactic.” Messin grinned.

“You look pleased,” said Nolenn with amusement.

“I know I am peculiar, Sir Nolenn, but I am finding rediscovering what that great lady Pree did oddly uplifting. I would have loved to have met her.”

“Not that peculiar, Messin. The more we are finding out about all those involved and the backgrounds of some of them, the more incredible it all is. That entire army and the war across the continent was run by a cart pusher and a bunch of sergeants, but I would give anything to have any of them with me here. Though, to be fair, I do have one of them in Be-Elin. Now, what else?”

“This next one is more for mining really, and we have used something similar ourselves previously, though not as potent. Really it’s a technique, but if you need to bring rocks down or block a gorge, then this is what you do.”

When Sir Nolenn returned to Mab-Horin, who had moved some distance away, he was looking thoughtful.

“That was a lot of noise,” commented the dragon. “I don’t think there is a bird left anywhere around here. I was tempted to leave myself. Dragons have sensitive hearing.”

“We’ll have to make you earmuffs, Mab-Horin. I need to plan how we use what Messin has done here, but I’m concerned that we don’t go too mad with it all.”

“Why?”

“He and his team have made a lot of explosives, but it has taken them months. I am not sure he realises how quickly they could be used up. If we set a fire across a small woodland, we could easily use twenty or thirty incendiaries in one go.”

“How did they manage this in the old wars?” Mab-Horin was only thirty-six years old.

“We will have to ask Be-Elin, but I feel like I am ringing information out of her like a rag. I keep forgetting how far back she is trying to remember. It’s remarkable how much she has been able to tell us.”

“I must get back to Levin Burh, Sir Nolenn,” the dragon reminded him. “Herrin and I are scouting east tonight.”

“Of course, I forgot. I am done here so let’s fly straight back.”

“Major Deffane!”

“Yes, Sir Hal?” The former sergeant changed direction halfway across the inner ward and marched to the kitchen where Sir Hal was sitting outside at a table with a jug of coffee and a couple of mugs.

“Coffee?”

“Thank you, sir.” The major sat opposite the knight and took a sip of the hot, black coffee.

“A few things for you, Deffane. My brother has another three hundred coming down from Lendor province, a hundred of them recruited from the town of Peviner. We have had trouble getting people from towns, so hopefully this means the message is now getting through.”

“Are those all for the irregulars, sir?”

“Yes, they are. I have no idea who they are or how old they are, I’m afraid. They have a way to travel yet, however, and I suspect they are completely untrained.”

“They all have been. We have had very few like the experienced fighters we had in the early days. I am not unhappy about that, though.”

“No?”

“We might not have the best fighters, but they are disciplined, and they are here because they want to be. I am having far fewer problems between them than we had before.”

“That brings me to the second piece of news. I have no idea how you want to handle this, but we’ve heard from the prisons. Apparently, that man Jon got himself in a fight and has killed someone. That’s his lot. He’ll be hanged now. Do you want to tell Silvi?”

Deffane sat back and pulled a face. “I am tempted not to tell her, to be honest. She’s in really good form, and Be-Elin has told me quietly she has stopped talking about it. I don’t think she has put it completely behind her, but she’s enjoying her life.”

“She and Be-Elin have built a superb team up on the tor,” said Hal. “And I know she has been helping Tellor train your archers. I will go with your instinct on this. But if it ever comes up, I leave you to judge how to approach it. I will need to tell his brother. Where is Silvi, by the way?”

“Archery competition at Given. It has become the centre of all the archery events now, and this is the biggest event so far.”

“Oh, should I have been there?”

“Probably. But to be honest, they have dragons up there, and Silvi and Tellor are competing against each other in one of their staged showdowns, so I doubt you would even get noticed.”

“It’s good I’m not sensitive about such things.”

“Anything else?” asked Deffane.

“Nolenn will be back later, and I am hoping he had a chance to check on the progress of the blackdust. Are you and Mennon available?”

“We can be. I know there is a scouting party going out tonight to Calon to follow up on the reports from yesterday, but that is all Silvi’s people.”

“Well, we can meet for dinner in the small hall then.” The knight stood up and stretched. “Nice weather, so why do I feel so cold?”

“We all do, sir. It’s because we are running out of time.”

“Where have they gone? That entire section is missing!” Be-Laka was all but spinning around in mid-air.

“I can’t see anything, Laka, it is still too dark for me.”

“Trust me, Losa, two days ago, this side of the camp was full. We better get back to the others quickly.”

Mab-Horin, Mab-Pelin, Be-Laka, and their riders had landed in woods three leagues to the south of the Calon training camp the night before, following reports that at least five hundred horses had been herded into the camp. The camp had not grown significantly over the last few

months, from what they could see, but now many more of the soldiers wore proper uniforms and Sir Nolenn had commented the camp was better organised. Be-Laka flapped down while the other dragons and their riders were getting ready.

"We have a problem," said Losa, slipping down from the dragon's back.

"They have already moved out a large section of their soldiers, and I couldn't see those horses," finished Be-Laka.

"Oh, shit!" Herrin was helping Mab-Horin with his hides. "Any trails?"

"Too dark still, even for me," replied Be-Laka. "We must get back over there."

"You are going to have to be quick," commented Kaffor, Mab-Pelin's rider. "It's going to be a bright day."

"It's more important to find where they are now," said Mab-Horin. Although not the oldest of the young dragons, he had become the second in command under Be-Elin. The large intelligent dragon tended to have a logical outlook that had proved to be a useful foil for Be-Elin's rasher mentality, and he had earned respect from the other dragons and riders. "I trust your judgement they have left. Leave the rest of this for now." He waved at their camping gear. "They have not been patrolling this far out so it should be safe enough. We'll split into three because there are three logical routes that I can think of that they would have taken. Directly west from the camp, north-west heading up behind Levin Tor, or south-west down into Tulinor. If they have gone any other direction, they have stopped being our problem. Two hours, then back here."

Mab-Pelin dropped a wing for Kaffor. "I'm the quickest so I will take the longer north-west route."

"We'll take the south-west road to Tulinor," said Losa, jumping up on the back of Be-Laka who flapped straight up into the early dawn.

"That leaves us with the west road," said Herrin to Mab-Horin. "Though I don't think they will be there."

"Why?" asked the dragon as he leapt into the air.

"Too obvious? Sorry, not much of a reason."

"Not really," said the dragon, laughing. "But I think you might be right. We'll check anyway, then come back here and see what the others have found."

Flying with a warm sun caressing your back is a joy for both rider and dragon. When the sun warms the land, the gently rising air fills the wings, and with a little breeze the flight becomes smooth and effortless. Travelling south-west from the military training camp in Calon towards Tulinor, the rolling hills gave way to open moorland, broken up by the odd hill and one large tor towards which Be-Laka and Losa were flying. The two friends had developed a very simple way of sharing the scouting from high up; Be-Laka watched forward and down, understandably, while Losa sat facing backwards checking for what they had missed.

"About-turn, Be-Laka. I think I saw something."

"Where?" The dragon banked around steeply and flew back the way they had come.

"Go to the south, towards those hills," said Losa, turning around, and leaning forwards. They were about ten leagues south-west of the camp and had been trying to find any good roads. "Oh, I'm not sure what I saw now. I think we have the route wrong. We should be to the south of the hills not to the north."

"I'm going higher," called back the dragon. "Nice clear skies and I should be able to get a better idea of what is where quickly."

Losa settled on the dragon's back and buttoned up her jacket; it would be colder higher up in the thinner air. She loved flying high, especially on a day like today when Dirt was spread around her like a map. But although she could make out details like mountains and forests, roads were too indistinct from up here, so it was better to leave the scouting to the sharp-eyed Draig yr Anialr.

The hills were small and mostly covered with rough grass and gorse, but rocky outcrops trailed along the tops forming a ridge of intricate forms. The southern slope of the hills was steeper than the north with small cliffs and the occasional run of scree flowing down through sparse little woods.

"There is your road, clever one!" said Be-Laka to Losa. "Running below the ridge. How far along do you reckon they would be?"

"They were still in the camp three days ago when those horses arrived. If we guess that they would not have left until at least the following day, then they have travelled a maximum of fifteen leagues or so. They might be farther along towards the tor than we are."

"I'll fly west and follow the road, then. They might be camped."

"Possibly," said Losa. "It depends when they are grazing the horses. That is a lot of hungry animals."

"I have the sun behind me so I can risk going lower, but not much. Come up on my shoulders."

"Just stop here a moment then," said Losa with a grin.

"Very amusing!" But Be-Laka did glide for a short way while Losa slid up towards the dragon's head and wrapped her legs around the strong neck, then resumed the gentle, rhythmic beat of her wings. It was no coincidence that many riders were female. Although for a greater dragon like a Draig yr Anialr the difference between a small woman and tall man was of no huge consequence, the women's natural agility was very helpful to both rider and dragon. All the new riders had heard the stories of Mistry and Mab-Onin and their unbelievable skills, but had been warned never to try any of them. Ever. Be-Elin had pointed out that the stories neglected to mention the number of times that Mistry fell off on landing, and the interesting array of bruises she and the one-legged Mab-Onin collected on a regular basis. Or that Mistry ended up missing fingers and toes.

"Just enough trees to be annoying!" said Losa, leaning forward and looking down.

"Long shadows at this time of day too. Oh, hang on. Dust cloud."

"They are up early," commented the rider.

"And must be moving at more than a walk. I'm going higher. I'm worried they will see me."

The dragon lifted a few hundred feet and banked to the north, following the road as it wound into a shallow valley and through denser woods.

"I can't see the dust cloud now!" complained the dragon.

"To your right a bit," said Losa.

"Thank you!" The dust was rising like a mist and the light from the morning sun gave the cloud an eerie quality. "Oh, look. That is why they are up so early!" The dragon flew just a little lower and even Losa could see the long column. At the head were the horses with riders, but following at a trot were five hundred infantry soldiers.

"Stop up on the Tor, Be-Laka. I reckon we can see from there."

The dragon powered higher, well out of view, and settled on the peak just by a large boulder. Losa slid off her back, climbed up the huge rock and sat on the top. "Well?" asked the dragon.

"You can't miss them, can you? Or at least their little cloud. Where does this road lead to? Looks like they are continuing south-west."

"Tulinor, who are allies of Calon, so Sir Hal said. Why would they go there?"

"We better tell the others, then work out what we do next."

"They'll be getting impatient. Hold your breath and I will go higher and catch the winds."

The young woman jumped down from the rock and landed lightly on the dragon's back.

"I'm on!"

"It has been nearly three hours!" grumbled Mab-Horin.

"Sorry, but we found them," said Be-Laka as Losa jumped off her back.

"They are heading into Tulinor," explained Losa. "They are half-walking and half-trotting, both the infantry and the cavalry, and are making good time."

"We should fly back there," suggested Be-Laka. "Try to work out exactly where they are going."

"I agree," said Herrin.

"We need to know what is happening here too," said Kaffor.

"I think we split up," suggested Mab-Pelin. "One of us go back to the burh and report to Sir Hal, two of the dragons fly down into Tulinor and scout out possible destinations, and you three humans go to the camp and see what you can find out."

"Dangerous," pointed out Mab-Horin.

"Pelin is right, Horin," said Losa. "While they are sitting there, we are just guessing. If we can get into the camp tonight we have a chance of finding something out. It's still early so you can drop us well out of the way, and we can walk in. Two of you pick us up in the early morning somewhere."

"I think just two go," said Mab-Horin. "I would like someone to go with the dragons to Tulinor just in case any footwork is needed."

"Alright," said Herrin. "You take Losa and me down to the camp, and Kaffor can go with Pelin and Be-Laka."

"I'll fly back to Levin Burh and be back by dawn," said Mab-Horin. "We better leave now. No heroics, you two. Once you have enough information, get out of there."

"We better split up," said Herrin to Losa. "Looks like the soldiers are all male."

The two riders had changed from their leathers and were wearing the simple, home-made clothes worn by common people right across central Bind.

"You see what you can find out from the ordinary soldiers, Herrin. I'm going up to those command tents we saw earlier."

"Careful, Losa. We have no idea how well guarded they are."

"Well, nothing has been so far; they must still think their camp is well hidden. Back here in an hour?"

"Okay."

While Losa crept quietly along the treeline to the eastern end of the camp, Herrin looked down at his own clothes. Since the camp was hidden some distance away from local villages, peasants were hardly likely to be stumbling into it, and the camp was away from either of the main trade routes, nestled in a valley. There was only one moon up, Efen Mona, and that was low in the sky, so the camp was dimly lit by the various cooking fires soldiers were using to prepare their evening meal. There was a broad, cleared perimeter between the woodlands to the

south of the camp and the tents, so Herrin had no choice but to duck low and trot across the grass, keeping as quiet as possible. He had chosen a spot where the tents were in darkness, and he carefully picked his way through the guy ropes, occasionally stopping to listen to any fragments of conversation he could overhear.

"Three days, the sergeant said," complained a deep-voiced man. "I've been in the camp for six months now. I'm desperate to get out of here."

"We would've gone by now had that other lot not left three months back."

"That was on the other side of the camp, wasn't it? Never worked out what that was about. The commanders shut down any gossip."

"All I got was they were northerners, going by the accents. Messed up the recruiting, though. We lost all our archers from our company, and the new recruits aren't as good."

"Well, we've no training for the next couple of days, so I'm getting myself plenty of sleep."

Herrin moved on passed a few more tents and grabbed a jacket that was hanging over a guy rope.

"Are we still being moved tomorrow?"

"Yes, and it's a right bloody pain! The second company is short of pikes, so they are transferring our platoon."

"Why are they short?"

"I don't know! Pass me a beer. I don't want to talk about it."

Herrin made his way carefully towards one of the campfires. A man was sitting on the ground alone, drinking from a tin mug. As Herrin watched, the man started to get to his feet, wobbled, and sat down again heavily. Groaning, he took out a flask from his jacket and poured something into his mug.

"Rough night?" asked Herrin cheerfully, slipping on the jacket.

"Night, day, last night and the last three months."

"When are you moving out?"

"You from Ginner's platoon behind here?"

"Yeah," lied Herrin.

"Then we are following you out. Don't you listen to the orders?" slurred the man.

"Not really."

"Ha! Me neither. Here, you want a drop?" The drunk man handed over his flask. Herrin sat down, grabbed a mug that was lying on the ground, tapped it out and poured himself just a little.

"Cheers!" Herrin grinned and pretended to take a sip. When the smell reached his nostrils, he winced; it had to be some camp-made rubbish.

"Have enough of that and you are as brave as a hero, mate," said the drunk with a bitter laugh. "Or you stop caring. One of the two."

"I reckon you're right!" Herrin leant back like he had been sitting there all night. "How long have you been up here?"

"Nine months me. I was one of the first up here digging the camp out."

"Bloody hell; that is a long time in one place!"

"Yeah, I know." The man leant back and burped. "Still, got to be worth it. The loot alone."

"You reckon?"

"Oh, yeah. It's amazing what you can pick up from a village. People are always hiding stuff; a few coins here and there. I sent my missus a bag full of goodies when we raided Calon. You missed that one?"

"I only came in three months ago."

"Stupid git! We emptied the villages around here. The King down in Harindad didn't seem to care." The man burped again and slipped down onto an elbow. "Oh, I am going to be sick in the morning!"

"Have you got anywhere special you want to go then?"

"No idea, mate. Never been to Hertenesse. But =, they say. Oh, gods!" The man burped again and pulled a face. "Not sure what is worse; booze or food! Have you been up there?"

"No, never done this before."

"Well, take it from me; just keep your head down and do what they tell you. When they ain't looking, double back and get what you want. Everyone will be doing it, but don't get too eager or they'll get pissed off at you. Oh, shit!" The man suddenly turned from the fire and puked on the ground, then groaned and passed out on his back.

"Cheers, mate," said Herrin, grinning. Then emptied his mug in the dirt and crept back into the dark.

It was clear some of the commanders had already left the camp because a few of the big tents were now empty and unguarded. Losa slipped in through the open flap of one and hid as four guards marched passed and down to the main camp. This officers' compound was a considerable distance from the rest of the army, and the area roped off. If they had not been decamping, Losa doubted she would have been able to get inside.

The coast clear, Losa left the empty tent and made her way cautiously to the back of a much larger tent, lit inside by flickering oil lamps. She could hear several voices laughing and talking, but the words were frustratingly indistinct. Losa cursed quietly. It had been a longer hike around the camp perimeter than she had expected and looked like a wasted trip.

"Are you commanding that scouting troop tomorrow?" Losa ducked down into the shadows as two men appeared from the front of the tent.

"No, Geggor is commanding it, why?"

"Just step back here a minute, captain." The men made their way through the guy ropes right to where Losa was hiding, stopping only a few paces away. She lay flat and tried not to breathe.

"What's worrying you, Colonel?"

"Most of it, to be honest. We should have been out of this camp three or four months ago, hit them in Hertenesse, and be making our way north."

"We are going in the next couple of days," pointed out the captain.

"I know, but we lost all those Wessens, and they were the most professional soldiers we had; best archers too. The replacements are only half trained, and the rest of the companies are bored sick. I think the cavalry are the only group that has any moral left."

"They should be joining up with the cavalry from Tulinor day after tomorrow and pushing north."

"Well, I hope they make lots of noise because I am worried about what we are taking west from here."

"My company are mostly raw. All in uniform now, but can't shoot. What have you said to the Baron, Colonel?"

"I haven't dared say anything. He's been down in the capital Harindad most of the time, wining and dining their king, and he only came back today."

"None of this is new," said the captain. "So why all the creeping around."

"I keep getting these reports that they have dragons or something up in Hertenesse. Have you heard anything?"

"Gossip of the camp. To be honest, I've no idea what to make of it. All I've heard is some have turned up at fairs over the summer. For all I know they could be those giant puppets or something."

"You don't think there is anything in it, then?"

"Not really. Are you worried about it, Colonel?"

"I don't know. It is bothering me; I'll be honest. Nine months ago it seemed so well planned; subdue the rebels in the villages for the king, camp here, build the army with hired help, and walk into Hertenesse with the Tulinorians. Simple. Now we have been here far too long and have lost some of the most experienced troops. As far as empire-building goes, this eastern Baron seems to have lost the plot."

"What are you going to do?"

"Oh, I'll march in there, but if it starts going wrong, I will let my men loot and get back out. We are both here for the money, Captain."

"Well, I think I will follow your lead, and I'll keep my eyes open. But when it comes to dragons, I wouldn't lose sleep over it. I can't see kid's stories coming to life, to be honest."

"Maybe, Captain. I better go back in before he asks where I am."

"I am heading back to my company. He was ignoring everyone beneath a major anyway."

"That comes of having a Plain's Baron for a general. Good night, Captain."

"Colonel."

Losa waited until both men had moved safely away then worked her way back quickly through the compound. Trying to get more information would be greedy, and she had what they needed.

"You ready, matey?" Silvi did a very naughty wiggle while looking at the distant descendant of Gellin, who, Be-Elin had just told her, had been kissed by one of her own ancestors, Mistry.

"You'll never do it, shorty!" taunted Tellor. Someone in the crowd, probably rather small, hissed.

They had spent the previous day judging archers from all over the Kingdom of Hertenesse at the big competition at Given, and had also helped man the recruiting stall in the little market square. Today would be the semi-finals and the finals, but first, they were putting on a show. This had been the biggest archery competition yet held, and twice the number of people had turned up than expected. The villagers were loving it, and had been roasting sheep, dishing out beer, and making quite a bit of coin.

"Do you think I can do it?" shouted Silvi to the crowd.

"Yes!" replied all the women. "No," cried the men.

They had intentionally made it man versus woman to show that it really did not matter whether you were male or female, and the crowd had lapped it up. Now they had set up their farthest target, a small red disc, right down at the far end of the high street. Silvi had nocked a brightly coloured arrow, and had the bow halfway pulled, but was sticking her tongue out at Tellor rather than look at the target. The man leant on his big longbow and stared at her.

"Bet you miss!"

"No, I won't!" she replied, rudely.

"Oh, yes you will."

“Oh, no I won’t!”

The crowd had already seen the two hit every target, every pot, every bottle and were well and truly wound up.

“No, I am not going to do it!” said Silvi with an exaggerated gesture, and dropped her bow on the ground.

“See, she can’t do it!” announced Tellor to the crowd, enjoying being the villain.

“Yes, I can!”

“Well, then. Do it!”

“Nah, don’t want to!”

“Awww!” shouted the crowd.

“Anyway, you could never do it,” mocked Silvi, poking Tellor in the chest with a finger

“Any day of the week, shorty!”

“No, you can’t; you’re a boy! And boys are useless! Ain’t they girls!”

The girls cheered; especially the much older ones.

“Yes, I can; better than you! What do you reckon boys? Are we better than the girls?”

“Yes!” shouted the boys obligingly.

“I’m better than you!” retorted Silvi, grabbing her bow dramatically and squaring up to Tellor.

“And I’m better than you!”

“I’m better!”

“I’m better!”

“I’m better!”

“I’m better!”

“I’m better!”

“I’m better!”

“Together?”

“Together!”

And before the crowd had a chance to catch up, the two archers nocked their arrows, drew their longbows right back to their ears and let fly. The crowd fell silent as the arrows rose up into the air together, arched in the midday sun, and fell towards the small red target, three hundred paces away. Timed to perfection after several days rehearsing, the arrows drew closer and closer and then with barely a beat between them, both hit dead centre of the target.

“Bullseye!” shouted Berron from the target, who had been roped in to judge this phoney competition. The crowd cheered and Be-Elin and Mab-Corin crashed down onto the square. The two archers ran up their tails, waved at the crowd, and the dragons leapt into the air and flew up into the sun and away.

“Okay, far enough! Put me down!” shouted a scared Tellor, who was holding the straps as tightly as he could.

“You are dreadful!” said Mab-Corin, laughing, as the two great Draig yr Anialr landed on the field where the finals would be held in an hour.

“I can’t help it!” said Tellor, sliding off and all but kissing the ground.

“So, how long have you two been practising that shot?” asked Be-Elin, giggling at the white-faced Tellor.

“About a month,” said Silvi. “It’s not the actual shooting; it’s the build-up. By the time we do all that shouting, trying to concentrate on our aim is really hard. I nearly let fly too quickly today. My bow is a bit shorter, and I draw slightly faster.”

“Well, they certainly loved it,” said Mab-Corin. “This has been a fun two days. Are you judging the finals?”

“No, we’re leaving that to the people of Given,” said Tellor. “This is their competition, not ours, and it’s right they do it. For now, I’m going to have some lunch. Coming, shorty?”

“I am not standing here playing gooseberry with these two!” said Silvi, grabbing Tellor by the arm.

“What’s playing gooseberry?” asked Mab-Corin, the young dragon from half way around the world of Dirt.

“Come here, gorgeous, and I shall explain!” replied Be-Elin with a wicked chuckle.

“This is going to be our last show this year, I think,” said Silvi as the two made their way down to the Old Man of the Plains Inn that now had the words Hen-Thyn painted on the bottom of the sign. “We don’t need to push any longer.”

“It has been fun, but it’s taken a lot of our time. You know they had thirty more recruits sign up yesterday, and the sergeant says they can all use longbows.”

“It’s what you wanted, Tellor. How is the training going? I’m sorry I haven’t been around for the last three weeks.”

“You are not meant to be helping anyway; I am amazed you found the time. It’s going well. We have been doing more work in the forests with short bows too, which will help when working with the irregulars. I noticed you had gone off for a few days last week.”

“Be-Elin wanted to go down to the Bain Hills with Mab-Corin to take a better look at one of the old dragon villages there. It’s mostly woodland now, but you can see where it was. So, I popped into Meressa Town to see a friend and check up on a few things.”

“Like what?”

“Well, we heard the king there has been ill and has passed over more of the running of Verron to a council. I have a place I stay there where the locals are very chatty, and I just asked them how it was going.”

“What are you two planning, Silvi?” Tellor opened the side door of the inn and waved at Berron, who was back behind the bar, two arrows sitting on the counter in front of him.

“Nothing, Tellor. But Be-Elin is still very nervous about Bind, and I don’t blame her. Don’t get me wrong, I like Meressa Town and my friends there are fun, but it’s dying in front of my eyes. I think much of Bind is like that.”

“I agree. I have seen it change just in my lifetime, and I’m hardly old.”

“So, Berron,” said Silvi, hopping up on a stool. “Which of us won?”

“Nothing in it, girl,” said the landlord, grinning. “But this red arrow was nearly the whole way through the target.”

“That’s Tellor’s bloody oversized bow!” said Silvi, chuckling. “It’s a right old pull to draw the damn thing.”

“You can still outshoot me most days,” said Tellor.

“That’s because I’m a better judge of the winds than you, I think.”

“Well, that was still a hell of a shot,” said Berron, producing two frothy pots of ale. “On me. I have sold more beer in the last two days than in the last three weeks.”

“Well, I didn’t start these competitions to help the local economy,” said Tellor. “But you are not the first village to have done well out of them.”

“Excuse me, Silvi?”

“That’s me!” Silvi turned jovially to the young boy who had just run in.

“Sorry, miss, but there is a dragon in the square. He sent me to get you urgently.”

“What’s this about?” asked Tellor with a frown. “Mab-Corin?”

“Can’t be; he has just been kidnapped by Be-Elin, again. Let’s find out. Lead on, boy.”

Silvi and Tellor arrived in the square at the same time as Be-Elin and Mab-Corin. Mab-Horin was sitting on the ground looking exhausted.

“Horin, what is going on?” asked Be-Elin. “We saw you fly overhead.”

“The Calons. They are on the move.”

“Oh, shit,” said Tellor. “We better go.”

“Mab-Horin, are you alright to fly?” asked Silvi.

“I will be shortly, but I am flying down to Sonaton after I have been to Riena.”

“Why?”

“The Calons have split their force and some are heading down into Tulinor. Sir Hal will explain the rest when you get to the burh.”

“Alright. Where is Herrin?”

“He is meeting me outside Sonaton with Be-Laka and Losa. It was quicker for me to come here on my own.”

“Tellor, we need to get our things,” said Silvi. “Be-Elin, you two grab your bags, and we’ll meet in the field. Take Mab-Horin to your little secret glade so he can rest for an hour.”

“What glade?”

“Elin!”

“Oh, that glade.” The three dragons leapt into the air leaving Silvi and Tellor realising they had attracted a small crowd.

“Sorry!” said Tellor to them all. “We have to rush, and you have a final to watch!” And he ran into the tavern followed by Silvi.

“Damn,” said Silvi, grabbing her bag from her room. “I was meant to present the trophy.”

“You can’t now,” said Tellor, sticking his head in through the door.

“I know. I’ll get Berron to do it. I’ve got an idea. Follow!” Silvi ran downstairs to the bar. “Berron, we have to go, and I’m meant to be presenting the Trophy.”

“I can do that.”

“Thanks. Have you got those two arrows and the target?”

“Here.” He pulled the arrows and target from under the bar. Silvi took them and shoved the shafts back in their holes.

“Tell them I’m very sorry, but give the winner this as well. The trophy is only a wooden plaque so they might like this.”

“I’m sure they will! Go on, get out of here.”

“Thanks, Berron, for everything, including before. Come on Tellor.”

“This is worrying me, and I’m getting too old for this. Should I be coming?”

“I am not sure you will make it; you are not flying anywhere near as much now, Snowy.”

“Well, they are spoiling me here.”

“You are their hero, mother! They’re allowed to spoil you. You are one of the older dragons here.”

“Not the oldest, I would like to make that very clear!”

“Well, true. All the Draig Dechrin are older than you.”

“And others! That is not a helpful comparison.”

“What is the matter?”

“You. You are the matter.”

“Why? I have done all we planned. We have found the eastern islands and the route, and everything is ready, just about.”

“You are the matter because you will not leave it alone once it starts. You and that bloody magician in your head are going to live through every moment of this, and I am not going to be there, and I am not going to see you. I bet you have homes there again.”

“Yes, I do, but they are places to live, not homes. I have built my home here in the glade. I have my room at the Abbey, and I like that, but the rest are just places where I store things.”

“And you will not live there again?”

“No.”

The sea dragon blinked in pleasure and leapt stiffly into the air to return to her house. The woman watched her go with a worried frown.

“Not yet.”

Chapter 16 – The Valley

“How far, Be-Elin?”

“Eight leagues?” The dragon landed on Fevin Rocks with a skid, the highest of the Fevin Hills where Silvi had made her camp.

“Scouts?”

“I saw three pairs of riders two leagues ahead of the column, I don’t know if there are any others.”

“It’s going to be tight!” Silvi was sitting cross-legged on the ground and had laid out a map of Fevindor, the southern province of Hertenesse. She grabbed the bread and ham she had dug out for her lunch and munched on it thoughtfully.

“I saw you have everyone digging like mad down the hill. How many bags of rocks are you hoping to fill?” asked Be-Elin.

“Be-Laka and the others have brought fifty bags, but even with the people who have come down from Sonaton to help, I don’t know if we will fill them all. We haven’t had much time.”

“I know, girl. How is Mab-Horin?” asked Be-Elin with a grin.

“He’s alright. Mab-Hene has now flown to Messin’s quarry to fetch the incendiaries for Major Mennon.”

Be-Elin chuckled. “I know it’s dangerous, but I am not going to forget Mab-Horin’s face in a hurry.”

The young dragon had flown from Given up to the Dondor Mountains, and Messin had given him all the blackdust bangers he could carry, wrapped up in straw. The volatile explosives had to be carried without being bashed around, and even though they were safely cushioned, the dragon had winced every time even the smallest breeze buffeted him. Apart from being tired when he had arrived at the Fevin Hills, he had been shaking like a leaf.

“We need to start making these at the camps in future, Be-Elin,” remarked Silvi. “That was far too risky, aside from the poor dragon being unable to even speak.” She grinned, a little guiltily. “How are you holding up? You have been flying non-stop.”

“I feel fantastic!” said Be-Elin cheerfully. “Since those dragons have arrived and I have been training them all, I am so much fitter. Loving it!”

“And so is Mab-Corin, no doubt.”

“You mind your own affairs!”

“Oh, I’m like a monk now.”

“Apart from going to Meressa?”

“Yeah, well, apart from that. But Teni is... Well anyway, I can’t see me going there for a while now. If Sir Hal is right, even if we beat this attack, which is going to be tough, we are going to have trouble from one quarter or another.”

“As you saw on your travels, there are three groups of common people in Bind,” said Be-Elin, settling down by the map. “Those who are isolated or ignored and are trying to stay that way, those oppressed and scared to do anything, and those ready for revolution. What I don’t know is who is who.”

“You can’t tell from a thousand feet up, Elin. What worries me more is I don’t think our King here on the ground knows either, though he knows more than most. Meanwhile, we have half an enemy army a day away, and our archers are half a day away at best. They’re our strongest weapon, and we need them here. Elin, I need someone to help me; I don’t know what I’m doing!”

“Well, if Farthing was here he would be asking for ideas and almost always the answer would be to do two things at once; one they expect and one they don’t.”

Silvi counted off what she knew. “The dragons are the unexpected. We are aware the Calons have some knowledge of you being here, but are treating it sceptically. If they think we are going against them with horses, then they are going to be disappointed since most of what we have are with Sir Hal. But our archers can outshoot theirs, I’m sure of that.”

“Why?”

“Because no one has seen any longbows. My usual longbow is a little shorter than some because I don’t want to bash you and Horse with it, but I can hardly hide it easily. My favourite bow, the one you brought me, is a lot longer. If they were using longbows, we would have seen them, and their targets at their training camp were only set out for short-range practice.”

“So, you don’t have horses, but you have longbows and dragons. How are you going to use them?”

“Are you teaching me?” asked Silvi with a raised eyebrow.

“I have never stopped!” exclaimed Be-Elin.

“Yeah, okay. Well, we have only been training the dragons and riders to scout, so far.”

“Correction; you have only been teaching the riders to scout, the dragons know more about fighting that you realise, not just about dropping rocks.”

“Be-Elin, there are things you are not telling me, aren’t there?”

“Please, don’t ask, Silvi.” The dragon sounded genuinely pained.

“I know; you’ll tell me when you’re ready. So, I’m assuming the dragons don’t need the riders to drop rocks.”

“No, but the riders can throw those bangers that Mab-Horin brought in. Though they used them differently in Pree’s Army.”

“How?”

“They used long throwing sticks to lob the bangers from the middle of Ben Lowen’s squares at the cavalry.” Be-Elin had told Silvi everything she could remember about Ben Lowen’s tactics that had proved so successful, even when outnumbered.

“But we don’t have a massive infantry army. I guess that you will drop rocks first while the Calons are bunched together, then drop the bangers when they try to reform?” asked Silvi.

“Probably. The dragons are not going to want to carry many of the bangers because they have to be wrapped in straw for safety, which is bulky.”

“We can keep some for the soldiers to throw by hand, I suppose. How do we deploy the archers? All of ours are on foot, which is not a problem if we know where the Calons are going to be, but I don’t. If we put them in the wrong valley or on the wrong hill, they’ll walk straight past us. Be-Elin, we need to find Sir Nolenn. Bring him up here and plan this properly.”

“There you go. That is a proper Farthing thing to do.”

“But Johnson was a general,” objected Silvi.

“Only by other people’s reckoning. He never saw himself as anything more than a cart pusher, and he would always ask for advice. That is why he was a better general than either Tekkinmod or Duke Henry. Keep thinking and I will fetch your expert.”

Be-Elin collected both Nolenn and Deffane from the column of archers, and they and Silvi quickly worked out a basic plan.

“Our archers will be able to change position if needed faster than you think, Silvi,” said Deffane. “That column coming up here is slow-moving, and they won’t want to tramp just anywhere on these hills with their horses. It is all gorse and bogs and very rough terrain with plenty of places where horses could trip and fall.” He used a lead on the map to eliminate the valleys that he was confident they would not use. “They have to come through the hills or they are going to add twenty leagues to their trip. I doubt they think that they are catching us by complete surprise, but they will not want to risk giving us too much time to prepare either.”

“I was thinking about hitting them with the dragons as soon as they are all back,” said Silvi.

“Bad idea,” replied Nolenn. “They are on the flatter part of the moor and can spread out quickly. If we wait until they get into the hills, they will be more contained, and we can use the archers to box them in.”

“Absolutely,” agreed Be-Elin. “Dropping the rock bags only works well when they are close together. They might not be using longbows, but they do have archers. That limits how low we can go safely, at least some of the time. I want to keep the dragons higher and make hit and run attacks on the cavalry.”

“Nolenn, will they know we are waiting here in the hills?” Silvi asked.

“If you are right about the scouts, then possibly not yet. I am hoping this force is trying to sneak around the back of us while their main force is coming in from the east. If we hadn’t had dragon scouts, we would not have known this part of their plan existed, at least not in time to get anyone here. They are keeping to the road, and if they continue along that route, we can stay hidden, I think. They will not want to wander off the path if they can help it, but we should watch for scouts riding over the hills. If they discover us, we can grab them before they report back. We have twenty mounted scouts travelling with the archers, and I have told them to get here as quickly as they can.”

“You pick your favoured position for the archers then, Nolenn,” decided Silvi. “Be-Elin and I will follow whatever you decide to do. We are much more flexible than you.”

“Give me a quick tour of the hills?” Deffane asked the dragon.

“Climb up, Serg!”

“Major.”

“Major Serg.”

“How do you put up with her, Silvi?”

“She takes me to the beach when I want to swim; I will put up with just about anything for that.”

Deffane chuckled. “You two make my days much brighter, you know that?”

Be-Fena landed outside Levin Burh and called for a guard to fetch Sir Hal. She had been keeping an eye on the Calon infantry marching towards the castle until she was needed in the Fevin Hills.

“Be-Fena, what do you have?”

"They are making quick progress, Sir Hal, and are camping on the heathland inside your border."

"That means they will reach Levin Forest late tomorrow. Anything else we should know?"

"There are still a few remaining at their training camp guarding the officer's compound, and there are some stragglers on the road; I am not sure what that says about fitness."

"Difficult to say, you will always get a few not up to the mark. What about wagons?"

"Keeping up with the main army. I'm sorry, I don't know enough to judge how much they are bringing with them; I would need Be-Elin for that."

"Don't worry, Be-Fena, you have already given us far more than we would have known using human scouts. Are you going to Fevin Rocks?"

"Is Mab-Hene back?"

"Yes, he is. He has brought those incendiaries and has gone up to your village to rest."

"I will check on him first then."

The young dragon, the youngest of the group, leapt into the air and flapped up to the Tor. Sir Hal smiled as he watched her go. When the ten dragons had first arrived, he had had a little problem telling any physical differences between them or even between them and the far older Be-Elin, other than some obvious differences in size. But now he had studied them for some months, he could see the added lightness and agility of some of the younger dragons, despite Be-Elin's impressive strength and speed. Be-Fena, who was only thirty-three, had something definitely young and feminine about her; very similar to Silvi in many ways.

"See," he said to himself. "Be-Elin is right. We really do have a lot in common. Guard!" he called out, walking through the gate. "Go grab my horse and tell the last wagon to move out."

"How many do I have, sir?" asked Major Mennon when Sir Hal arrived in the company of the wagon of explosives.

"I haven't looked yet, but it won't be very many; Messin has not had enough time, and these won't be those special ones he spoke to Sir Nolenn about."

"At this stage, I will take anything if it makes a noise, Sir Hal. I'm feeling outnumbered."

"To be fair, you are!" said Sir Hal with a laugh. "But if we don't stray from these forests and keep the fight where we want it, then we have a good chance."

"Will they stick to the road?"

"I'm not sure yet. They will camp tonight, and we will watch them in the morning," said the knight.

"I already have scouts out both on foot and on horseback following up on Be-Fena's report."

"Yes, she reported to me at the Burh. She is off to join Sir Nolenn and Silvi."

"If you will excuse me, Sir Hal, I need to get these through to my irregulars before night closes in on me."

"I will come with you."

"Silvi?"

"Yes, what?" Silvi had been going through everything that everyone had been throwing at her. She knew she was not in charge, that was Nolenn, but somehow, she just felt buried under everything. She was not responsible for the Calons, she was not responsible for the recruitment, she was not responsible for any of it, so why did she feel like she was?

"Silvi!"

"I said what?" snapped the girl, and turned to face the king. "Oh."

“Rough day?”

“I’m sorry, Edver! What are you doing here?”

“Where else would I be?”

“In Riena? Your capital?”

“Silvi, this is my kingdom and it’s about to be overrun by an army nearly twice the size of mine.”

“Sorry, I’m being stupid. No, of course. Can I get you something? How did you get here?”

“Be-Serine brought me. I was going to come with Mab-Hene, but he thought it a bad idea.”

“Yes, he was probably right. Explaining why the king exploded in mid-air might be awkward!” Silvi grinned sheepishly.

“Silvi, I need nothing from you except for you to tell me where you want me.”

“What?”

“Silvi, I am king, but I am also a swordsman.” The king looked long and hard at the girl.

“We might lose. I cannot sit around doing nothing.”

“I know.” Every which way the young woman looked, the reality kept hitting her with repeated hammer blows. She was scared. “You should ask Nolenn, really.”

“Nolenn doesn’t need me,” said the king, chuckling. “Never has done really. But you look like you might.”

Silvi stared at the king and then thought about what he was wearing. “You’re a knight; you ride a horse.”

“Yes. Runs in the family.”

“Nolenn has a pile of scouts on horseback. They are all good archers too. Their job is just about finished as scouts. Can you command them if we need them?”

“Of course.”

“They are yours, then.”

“What do you want me to do with them?”

“I’m not sure. Edver, I’m a goat farmer!”

The king looked at the young woman in front of him. “Silvi, you are the best archer in my kingdom and Sir Hal says you are the cleverest of any of his officers, even if you are the most inexperienced. In addition, you ride the most powerful creature I have ever met in my life. You are far more than a goat farmer.” He put his head on one side. “What does your gut say?”

“That we might lose.”

“And?”

“We will need help.”

“That wasn’t what I was expecting you to say.”

“Edver, none of us think we have enough soldiers. We will need more. If not here, then your brother will need them. You will have to find more people.”

“From where?” The king looked puzzled.

“All those people Tellor and I have been telling to take up the longbow. The villagers. You have twenty scouts on horseback you can use for messengers. If it goes wrong, that will be your job. Command your people to come and fight for their country.”

The corner of the king’s mouth twitched in a barely suppressed smile. “Where do I find my little troop?”

Eleven dragons and eleven riders led by Silvi and Be-Elin stood surrounded by bags of rocks and a group of farmers from near Sonaton. The light flickered softly over the hills from the east

as the old sun of Dirt made its tired journey into the sky. Somehow, all fifty bags had been filled, and the men were ready to refill used bags if needed, though they had had no sleep during the night.

“You are Eofin now,” Be-Elin had told the young girl when the two had awoken. “And I am Be-Inua.”

“How can I be?” Silvi had asked.

“Because no one else can be. The desert dragons and riders always have two leaders. A human and a dragon. We are it. Live with it.”

“I am scared.”

“So am I, girl.”

“You?”

“Of course! Why would I be less scared of dying than you, child? I still have many things to live for.”

“Why are you here, Be-Elin? Why are you all here?”

“This is our home too. Long before it was yours or Edver’s. For months now, especially before winter, you have been out on countless small raids, fighting bandits and soldiers, facing danger all along the border. But you are my rider before anything else. We fight together today.”

Silvi cast her eyes around her tiny flight of dragons and riders. She was the youngest of all of them by several years, but they were waiting for her and Be-Elin to command them. “Be-Rona and Tonnel, go see if the Calons and Tulinorians are awake, we will rotate scouting for the next few hours. Mab-And and Correni, check in with Sir Nolenn for final orders.” The two dragon and rider pairs took off at once.

“Everyone else, sort out the Blackdust bangers and whale oil flasks,” added Be-Elin. “Silvi, let’s get the map rolled out.”

“They are on the move, Sir Hal,” called out Major Mennon, entering the small command tent.

“What time will they be in the forest?” Sir Hal was pouring coffee for himself in a tin mug and poured another for the major.

“At best guess, late this afternoon.”

“Good. Keep a base camp here, but get everyone else forward into their positions.”

“Sir.” Mennon drank back the coffee and disappeared through the tent flap shouting orders.

There was no question about it, this was going to be a desperate few days. Sir Hal finished his coffee slowly, listening to the urgent clatter and voices of Mennon’s irregular company getting ready for the five-league march through the forest to take up position and wait for the Calon onslaught. They had been preparing for so long, building enough of an army to defend the kingdom and its people from the Calon threat, that it had become routine. Even Hal himself would admit that he had grown almost blasé as the months had rolled on and on and still the Calons had made no move. They now knew the reason, of course; the invaders had suffered a breakdown of internal alliances and had needed to rebuild.

Sir Hal agreed with Mab-Horin that their intelligence about anything happening anywhere was terrible. If it were not for Silvi and Be-Elin, they would never have known about the camp in the first place. They hadn’t even known the camp followed an invasion of Calon that had put down a potential rebellion by the people there.

Now they were outnumbered two to one and were relying on their better knowledge of their own lands and, he hoped, better-trained soldiers with better weapons. Unfairly, perhaps, Sir Hal was also banking on loyalty and love of Hertenesse. The Calon force was being driven by greed; his people were defending their homes and their families. Preservation of those things you held precious could be powerful motivation in battle. Both he and his brother had been brought up to believe in themselves and to fight for what they believed was right. Was it too much to ask villagers to believe in this country in the same way they did? The king had been selling back lands to the people for exactly that reason. To give them something of their own they could build on and fight for while raising badly needed coin to pay those who left their fields to take up a sword or bow for Hertenesse. They could not promise their army the things the Calons promised theirs; a share of the spoils. But then, perhaps they were doing exactly that, though the reward was the right to live, not loot to spend in the market.

The tall, fair-haired knight, once a prince, doused the stove, buckled on his sword, and left the tent to join the soldiers on their march east. He knew his brother would be joining Sir Nolenn and Silvi in the Fevin Hills. The young woman was one of a vital circle of trusted people responsible for building the army. Nolenn, Deffane, Mennon, Tellor, Be-Elin and Silvi. They had all worked tirelessly to charm, cajole, recruit, and train the people of Hertenesse, but Sir Hal worried that he had put so much on a young person who was only eighteen. And yet, Silvi inspired not just those she met in the villages but his other officers too. He was certain she had not realised how important she was to this army, perhaps to the country. That she so closely resembled his long-dead sister made it all the harder. Today, however, he would focus on the Calons. They would not get past the forest.

Captain Tellor peeked over the bank cautiously at the long line of one thousand horses and five hundred infantry soldiers that were making their way into the valley. He had brought three hundred of the one thousand Hertenesse archers to this forward point, and they were hidden just above him behind the rise.

"Any more scouts?" Tellor asked Senni as she crawled up next to him.

"Not that we have found. We have taken out four on this side, but I have no idea what the Major has found with the main force. Need me to go out again?"

"No, Senni. You can stay here now and help me."

"When do we attack?"

"Not long, I would think. It's all down to Silvi and Be-Elin. Once they attack from the rear and drive the column up farther into the valley, then we follow them. We must trap them."

"Captain, why are you a captain and Silvi isn't?"

"She refused. Dragons and dragon riders don't have ranks. Anyone can become a dragon leader."

"Why don't they have ranks?"

"Dragons only recognise people who have done something worthy of respect, but it has to be something pretty dramatic or sustained over a long period of time. I think this is all down to being so damned long-lived. It makes small moments seem almost meaningless after a while."

"Sounds like a dream," said the young woman, chuckling.

"Be-Elin says it often just turns into an argumentative mess, but then she thinks most things do. Now, what is their infantry up to?"

Two long lines of the Calon infantry had broken into a trot and were moving either side of the cavalry column.

“Archers?” suggested Senni.

“Looks like it. Silvi was right. She thought they may protect the horses through here.”

“Short bow, by the looks of them,” commented Senni.

“Good, but they still shoot arrows.” Teller looked behind him down towards the moors in the south as the remaining infantry upped their pace to bridge the gap left by the archers. “Any time now would be good, Be-Elin,” he said to himself.

Silvi raised herself up onto her haunches and looked back at the ten pairs following in their wake. Ten dragons carrying ten huge canvas bags filled with head-sized and fist-sized rocks, jagged pieces of sharp flint, and large flasks of whale oil. And on their backs, ten riders with longbows, quivers full of arrows, and bags of ceramic balls filled with blackdust. The wind had dropped overnight, and the dragons were gliding silently a thousand feet up in the sky, wings spread wide, faces set with deadly intent.

“Now,” called back Be-Elin. Silvi lifted her arm and signalled the ten young dragons to start their descent.

Be-Elin had said that in battle the dragon was in charge, with the rider simply there to add firepower. Silvi could see the truth of it now as the dragons picked up speed, diving towards the line of horses and infantry in the distance. Be-Elin let the ten take the lead, dropping back to follow in their wake. She was not carrying rocks but had chosen to take a bag of small incendiaries while Silvi had a quiver of rag-wrapped arrows soaked in oil. When the ten emptied their bags and returned to their camp for more, they would remain, spread confusion, and keep watch as the battle unfolded.

Silvi checked her flame, protected from the wind in a metal box, was alight and secure where she had tied it to the hides in front of her, and touched Be-Elin on the neck to signal her readiness. The dragon rumbled in pleasure and anticipation, and Silvi felt the great muscles bunch beneath her feet. Thirty men, Silvi thought to herself. On the raids she had taken part in over the months, she had seen thirty men killed, half of those by her own sword or arrows. Looking down at the one thousand five hundred Calons, she felt her stomach tighten.

“Go!” roared Be-Elin, and the ten dragons pulled their wings in and plummeted towards the Calons.

Silvi and the riders had only seen the dragons practising this manoeuvre, and none of them were prepared for the violence of the onslaught. The Draig yr Anialr bellowed and trumpeted as they pulled out of their dives and scattered their tons of rocks over the rear lines of the infantry. Then powered on over the cavalry while the riders threw the small deafening explosives in amongst the horses’ hooves, the loud percussions sending panic like a wave through the column. Be-Elin followed them down more slowly, and Silvi loosed arrow after arrow into the infantry, igniting any pools of whale oil. The big flasks had smashed on impact, smothering those closest with the sticky oil, and they shrieked in pain as the flames wrapped around them.

“Fire!” roared out Teller, raising his own bow as his three hundred archers ran down from the rise and loosed their arrows at the rear of the column. Ahead of them, the Calon foot soldiers were recovering from the dragon-strike and were turning to face the new longbow attack. “Keep them moving!” Teller walked down the hill, pausing every five paces to loose another arrow. Behind him, his archers mimicked his deadly dance. One, two, three, four, five. Stop. Draw. Raise. Loose! One, two, three, four, five. Stop. Draw. Raise. Loose! One, two, three, four, five...

“The cavalry is speeding up!” warned Be-Elin.

“Fly to the head of the column!” shouted Silvi. “Let’s annoy the leaders.”

“Good idea. Hold on!” Be-Elin flapped her way up high into the sky and raced up the valley ahead of the Calon column. Silvi could see the rest of their archers waiting their turn either side of the valley. “Here we go!” The dragon dived down towards the horses and Silvi loosed war arrows at the officers at the head of the column, downing one of them and forcing the rest to scatter. Be-Elin continued her flight to the back of the lines and up to meet the ten dragons and riders returning with their second load of rocks.

“Hit the rear horses!” shouted Silvi to the Dragons. “We don’t want the column running back to the moors.”

“Single line!” roared Mab-Horin, and led the flight down for a second dive, Be-Elin and Silvi close on their tails.

“Archers! Forward!” Deffane roared out his order from his position on the western ridge and was rewarded with the distant echo of Nolenn giving the command to his archers in the east. The two groups of three hundred and fifty archers charged over the hills and fired into the column of horses as they approached. The Calon archers ran from the road shooting up the hill towards the Hertenesse archers, but with only short bows they were still out of range. “Ignore the archers, aim for the horses!” commanded Deffane, marching up and down behind his lines.

“We need to get behind them,” said Tellor to Senni. “We must keep that infantry moving up the valley.”

“I’ll pass it on, sir.”

Senni ran up the line of archers calling for them to follow Tellor who was running down into the valley and onto the road.

“Line up; two rows!” he shouted as his three hundred fell in behind him. “Aim high!”

Three hundred archers loosed three hundred arrows that arced through the air and fell into the failing infantry.

“Again!”

Another three hundred arrows followed the first.

“Forward!” Tellor marched his archers up the road, nocking another arrow ready to fire yet again.

The dragons flew in single file low and fast towards the panicking horses, then emptied the bags of rocks into the lines, the sharp-edged stones cutting the flesh and smashing the bones of both men and beasts. Silvi and Be-Elin followed, raining down flaming arrows and incendiaries into their midst.

“Watch out for our own archers!” shouted Be-Elin. “If they get too close they’ll be caught by the rock bags!”

“Get to Deffane; his are nearest!” Silvi shouted back.

Be-Elin turned sharply and flew up the valley, landing right behind the surprised major.

“Keep back, Deffane,” ordered Be-Elin. “We have three more runs to do.”

“Will do!”

“Now Nolenn!” Silvi commanded as Be-Elin jumped into the air.

“Keep firing!” cried Tello. The remaining infantry had rallied and had turned towards his archers. “Aim lower!” The Calon infantry, with nowhere left to go, charged headlong at Tello’s three hundred. Fifty had fallen before they were even halfway.

“Draw swords!” yelled Tello at his front line while the rear line continued to fire. “Charge!” Tello and his archers ran straight at the remaining foot soldiers, smashing into them, and hacking the demoralised men to pieces.

“Sir! Horses!” shouted Senni in warning. Tello caught his breath.

“Bows up!” he ordered. “Line up!”

On the third run, the dragons split the column in two, the front of the column breaking into a gallop up the valley.

“Stop the rear following!” roared Be-Elin at the ten dragons before they left to collect the fourth load of rocks. She turned in mid-air and led the flight towards the head of the rear column of cavalry, talons stretched ahead of her, Silvi loosing arrow after arrow over her head.

The girl had never seen the dragon use her talons before except when she had pinned Jon to the ground in the clearing; she was completely unprepared for what happened next. At the sight of eleven huge desert dragons flying in a line towards them like hunting eagles, the lead cavalymen tried to break and run. Be-Elin reached down with her huge feet and snatched a rider from his horse, tore him almost in two and threw his bloodied remains into the horses following. The other ten dragons ripped ten more riders from their horses then soared back into the air, dropping the men to crash into the Calon ranks.

“Down to the road!” Deffane ordered his archers. “Keep them in the valley.”

From the opposite hill, Nolenn ordered his archers to join Deffane’s company and the two forces spread across the road loosing arrows at the column of horses racing towards them.

“Hold the lines!” shouted Nolenn. The Calon cavalry spread out, raised their swords, and charged with a great yell of anger.

“Keep firing!” ordered Deffane, pulling out his own longbow and loosing arrows in a steady stream while Nolenn stood beside him and pulled his sword. Rider after rider was torn from their saddle by the wall of arrows, but the charge pushed on closer and closer.

“Swords!” commanded Nolenn at the last possible moment, and the archers dropped their bows and drew their swords. The remaining cavalry smashed into their lines with a thunderous crash.

Deffane hit the first horse to reach him with his bow, sending it rearing up and his rider toppling backwards onto the ground. The major pulled his sword from his back and hacked at men and horses with equal vigour, shouting and roaring in defiance at those who would dare invade his land and lay death upon these people who had adopted him as one of their own. Around him, his men fought and fell, cut and fell, hewed and fell, and many died. He swung left and right, cutting horses out from under riders, then hacking at the men that fell at his feet. He cut legs, stabbed into chests, grabbed feet out of stirrups, and each time a cut was returned, he ignored the pain, ignored the burning, and carried on hacking and stabbing and chopping around him.

“Shit!” Silvi’s eyes opened wide in horror as Be-Elin killed the rider and dumped his torn body on the cavalry.

The dragon roared in anger at her. “Keep firing, girl!”

“Sorry!” shouted back Silvi and fired into the horses below.

“Why won’t they break?” growled the dragon. “They are mad!” The rear column of horses was in complete disarray. The pair fought on and on from the sky, raining down arrows and incendiaries and blackdust bangers. Then the ten dragons returned with more rocks.

“Be-Elin, look out!” shouted Silvi, and the dragon flew up and out of the way as Mab-Horin and the other dragons came flying at speed from the opposite direction, trying to drive the horses back down the valley.

“Where the hell did he come from?” shouted Be-Elin. “Bloody idiot dragon!”

“No, he was right, Be-Elin,” replied Silvi. “Look, they’re breaking.”

The horses and remaining Calon archers turned and fled back the way they had come, trying to get away from the terror of the dragons.

“Tellor!” shouted Silvi. “He’s in the way!”

Tellor loosed his arrows at the horses charging towards his archers. He had lost many of his company fighting the last of the infantry, but now his lines stood firm amongst the blood and the dead, and loosed wave after wave of arrows at the panicking cavalry as they tried to break out of the valley.

“Target the centre!” ordered Tellor. “Split them!”

The archers concentrated their aim at the middle of the lines of horses.

“Out of arrows, sir!” shouted an archer.

“Me too!” shouted another.

“Damn!” yelled Tellor, loosing his last. “Behind me, form a wedge, draw swords!”

The archers bunched up behind the tough bowman, imitating the shape of the warheads they had been firing at the enemy.

“Hold!”

“Charge!” roared Mab-Horin, soaring just twenty feet over the heads of Tellor and his archers, his last bag held in his talons. The dragon didn’t even bother to empty the bag. He and his nine companions just smashed into the front of the cavalry charge, using the massive bags of stones to sweep away horses and riders like ants from a rock. What was left of the Calon Cavalry scattered over the valley, into the moors and away, while the dragon riders picked off those who were too slow.

“Deffane!” Nolenn ran forward to where the major was slumped down on his knees on the road. Around him lay the bodies of the horses and men he had taken with his sword. Nolen skidded in the gore and fell in front of the man. “Deffane!” he shouted again, struggling to his knees. “Deffane!”

“Be-Elin!” shouted Silvi. “Look. Up the valley. Let me down!”

“Silvi!”

“Just let me down!” Silvi jumped and rolled before Be-Elin even landed, and ran screaming to where Sir Nolenn knelt in front of the major. “No!” she shouted.

“Silvi!” Sir Nolenn jumped up and grabbed her.

“Help him!”

“I can’t! It’s too late!”

“No, dammit, no! Deffane, get up, you bastard, get up!” The girl shook with horror and anger.

Be-Elin stepped up behind the girl and grabbed her. “Silvi, stop it!”

“Be-Elin!”

“Stop it, girl! Shut up!”

Silvi stared at the dragon in horror. “He’s dead!”

“So are all the people around you. Look!” Be-Elin held the girl in her powerful hands and turned her round. “It is war. People die. It is horrible. But we live, and we fight and we honour. We do not scream like children!” The dragon was almost roaring at her, her voice shaking, her hands trembling. “We honour. We always honour them. Even when we should have bloody well been there to protect them! We honour them, girl!”

Silvi fell silent and looked up at the dragon in surprise, seeing the pain in her eyes; the anguish, bitterness, and guilt reaching forward five hundred long years.

“I should have been there to protect him!” shouted Be-Elin. “I should have bloody been there!”

Nolenn looked at the tableau in confusion. Silvi took a long, ragged breath, and turned to him.

“General Farthing, her rider. He was wounded by Tekkinmod after Be-Elin left for Angyn. It took years, but he died of the wounds eventually. She cannot forgive herself for having left. Even now.” Silvi wiped away a tear angrily and walked to the kneeling corpse of her friend. “We will honour you, Deffane,” she said in a steady voice, standing straight and strong. “We will honour you and all of them. Sir Nolenn, where is the King?”

“Up the Valley. He is waiting with the scouts.”

“Be-Elin, take me to him. Nolenn, we need to get to Sir Hal and Mennon; they are outnumbered.”

“Silvi, we have just fought a battle.”

“Which will mean nothing if they are then bloody well killed too!” She jumped up onto Be-Elin. “We honour him, Nolenn,” she shouted, standing tall on the dragon’s back. “We honour them all by wiping these bastards off the map!”

Be-Elin’s defiant roar was so loud as she leapt into the air that the strong knight flinched backwards.

“What crime have we committed?” said Nolenn to no one. “What did we get so wrong that makes such beautiful people so angry?”

“Is that the new history then?”

“I think history is a big word for this little book, but yes, it’s all our notes.”

“Our notes? You make it sound like I exist!”

“You don’t? Are you sure about that? I am still fairly convinced that memories do not argue. Though your memories are a bit unpredictable.”

“Are you going to hide it?”

“No! They are going to need this. Anyway, there is still the one question I haven’t been able to answer. I don’t know who or where the Cwendrina is.”

“And we are confident Pree was never her?”

“Yes, I have the proof of that now. I have your memory of her, and you didn’t know she was the Cwendrina, but you knew who was.”

“I didn’t!”

“I am not accusing you of lying, Eafa. But you knew all the way along who was the important one. You even said so several times and said she was your priority; you just didn’t know why and it puzzled you. Well, I know now.”

"I think you now know more than anyone. Even me."

"No I don't. You knew all this once; I'm sure of it. What I can't work out is why you have forgotten it. The answer to that may be vital one day. Another set of puzzles, but not for now."

"There may not be a Cwendrina."

"I know, dear old man. But I have to believe there is."

"Does it have to be a particular person, girl?"

"That has bothered me most of all. Every time we find out the truth of something, it proves to be less mystical and more logical than everyone has believed. Except this. In some of the writings we have found, the Ancients really worried about losing the line. They must have had a reason."

"But you haven't been able to find her."

"They are going to have to do that. The four of them. Better than one little brown-haired girl on a cart!"

Chapter 17 – The Villagers

“Where did those men who were digging your rock come from, then?” Edver Kellin asked Silvi as the two climbed down from Be-Elin’s back. “I thought they were from Sonaton.” Though the dragons were now well known in Hertenesse, the people of Sonaton backed away quickly when an angry Be-Elin landed in the middle of the busy town square unannounced, carrying the king and a short-tempered rider.

“Be-Elin, see to your fellow dragons; they have worked hard,” said Silvi.

“I’ll be back shortly, Dragon Leader,” replied the powerful Draig yr Anialr, and leapt back into the sky, scattering those who had gathered around.

“They came from some of the outlying farms,” explained Silvi to the king. “I knew one of them because I bought Horse from him. We haven’t managed to get any support from the town itself, despite the threat of Calon and Tulinor being so close.”

“I’ve had similar trouble with Peviner in Lendor, but then it is over fifty leagues away. Have you met the Mayor of Sonaton?”

“No, I haven’t. Not wishing to repeat myself, Edver, but mayors do not run out to see goat herders.”

“Be-Elin just called you Dragon Leader. I suggest you remember that, Silvi. She meant it.” Sometimes both the King and his brother managed to make Silvi feel like some sort of kid sister. It could be very annoying. “Well, I am here now, and just occasionally it pays to pull rank.”

They trotted up the steps of the town hall and bashed through the doors.

“Get Mayor Blinton, now,” said the king to an officious looking chap behind a desk.

“Who shall I say... oh!”

“Now, man. I really am in a hell of a rush.”

“Yes, your majesty.”

“Sir will do, now run!” The man ran. “Silvi, you made sure I wasn’t in the battle, didn’t you?”

“I am getting very fond of your lands, Edver, but this is not where I was born or where I intended to make a home. I didn’t feel I had the right to get the king killed. I’m not sure that will last, though.”

“This is really worrying you, isn’t it?”

“It’s worrying all of us. That is a huge force heading towards Levin Burh. We took most of the archers from Hal because it was the best way to stop the cavalry, but we have lost half of them today, plus the wounded. Five hundred people, many of whom I trained. I nearly lost Tellor, and I did lose Deffane. They are my friends.”

The king could see the loss of Deffane had wounded her deeply and she had, for whatever reason, pushed it out of the way. He hoped she would be able to let it out again soon.

“Your majesty!” Mayor Blinton was an undistinguished, serious man. He stopped and nodded curtly but politely to the king.

“Blinton, this is Dragon Leader Silvi Farthing. She and my troops have just defeated the force that was heading towards your town.”

“Oh, thank goodness!” The man looked genuinely relieved.

“But the remaining four thousand are now on their way towards Levin Burh where the chances of us defeating them are slim at best.”

The mayor looked taken aback. “Your army, sire?”

“Five hundred archers lost their lives today, and I don’t have enough recruits.”

“I am surprised; you have been recruiting up and down the country, sire.”

“Indeed, and the people of the villages have made up nearly the entire army. However, almost no one has been recruited from the towns.”

“Mayor Blinton,” cut in Silvi. “At the archery competitions at Given, your town was well represented and they had good archers.”

“Thank you, Dragon leader. The new bow has been very popular here.”

“Good. Payback time, mayor.”

“Sorry?”

“I think what the Dragon Leader is saying is that this is yours and your citizen’s country as much as it is mine. We need their help.”

“Their help, sire?”

“Mayor Blinton,” said Silvi, trying to remain even-tempered. “If we lose to this army, they will sweep across Fevindor and wipe you out. This army loots and destroys. If we do not get help, then we will lose. Are you prepared to do nothing?”

The mayor frowned at the young woman’s words. “No, Dragon Leader, I will not stand by. What will you have me do?”

“I want to send the call out to everyone to get themselves to the village of Kam as soon as they can,” said King Edver. “How can we do that?”

“How soon, sire?”

“We need them there tomorrow, and it’s eight leagues away,” said Silvi. “They have to leave today.”

“That is impossible! How do I get word around the town that quickly, sire?” asked the mayor, his eyes wide with worry.

The king looked back out through the door at the crowded square. “It’s very busy out there.”

“Market day, sire.”

“Have you a box I can stand on?”

It took the mayor ten minutes to quieten the people in the square enough so he could introduce the king, who then ignored the box and stood up on one of the trader’s tables, with apologies to the surprised woman.

“Our kingdom, our country, is in terrible danger,” he shouted out. “This morning, our archers and our friends, the Draig yr Anialr, destroyed a force of one thousand cavalry and five hundred infantry crossing the Fevin Hills to attack Sonaton.” Although dangerously close to the town, the battle had been far enough away that none at the market knew the Calons had attacked. The murmur that went through the square was of surprise as much as it was of relief.

“But there is now another force, a bigger force of four thousand soldiers, marching from the east. They aim to crush our army and then crush you. We cannot stop them; not on our own.”

Now he had their full attention. "I am not going to plead; I am just going to tell you straight. If we are to have a hope of beating this force, then we need as many archers, longbow and short bow, of any ability, to go to the village of Kam today. Not tomorrow, today. The armies of Calon may think they can beat our army, but I am damned sure they cannot beat the people of Hertenesse too. So please, spread the word. Anyone with a bow and arrows, head to Kam right now. Thank you."

When the king stepped down, most of the people stood around in silence, just waiting for someone else to do something first.

"Oh, sod this!" snapped Silvi, and jumped up onto the table. She took her longbow off her back and nocked an arrow. "Before you could take a step I could kill three of you," she shouted out. The crowd moved back a pace. "You would think I was mad. You would believe I am a murderer. Three of the people you love, three friends or family, would be dead." Silvi turned slowly, moving her aim across the crowd. "Today, one of my closest friends, a man who I trusted with my life, was cut to pieces by Calon swords. I do not know how many he killed himself, but when we found him, he was kneeling in his own blood and gore." She lowered her bow. "I love my friends. They are my family, and I will not stand by while the soldiers from Calon hack them to pieces. So why are you still standing here waiting for the Calons to come and kill your friends and your family?" Silvi was angry, and her young voice was harsh and tired. "I will be waiting at Kam for all those with the guts to come and stand next to me and next to their king."

As she finished, Be-Elin landed in the square scattering the crowd. Silvi marched over to the dragon with the king, and they climbed up on her back. She stood up on the hides and looked around the silent square, her eyes falling on the busy tavern where at least thirty young men had come out to listen, still carrying their pots of beer. With a growl, Silvi nocked two arrows and sent them flying into the tavern door, slamming it shut.

"The tavern stays shut till the bloody Calons are beaten," she shouted. "Go, Be-Elin."

The dragon flew into the sky and back to Fevin Hills to help Sir Nolenn. Down in the square several young men and women left to go to their homes and fetch their bows. Within an hour, the square was empty. The landlord of the tavern opened his door, removed the arrows, then used them to nail a sign to the wood.

"Tavern closed till we beat the bloody Calons."

"They are camping early," whispered Golin. "I would have thought they would have carried on for another couple of hours."

"That is a lot of soldiers to get camped. Come on, we better tell Sir Hal where they are. He is not going to be happy."

Golin and Relli slipped back into the trees and made their way to where Sir Hal and Major Mennon had set up their camp with the eighteen hundred irregulars and two hundred knights. The Calon army, now just two leagues east, was twice their size and was almost all foot soldiers, the cavalry having journeyed through Tulinor to the Fevin Hills.

"Where?" Sir Hal growled to himself. "Alright, keep an eye on them." The knight dismissed the two scouts and turned to the map rolled out on a small table and held flat with two beer mugs and his dagger.

"That is going to make any night attack impossible," said Major Mennon. "They are too far from the forest edge."

“They are still going to have to come through the forest tomorrow if they want to attack Levin Burh. They must have guessed we are here, and they cannot afford to ignore us and let us move behind them. Ambush is our best defence still.”

“I know, but I really would have liked to have damaged their morale, if nothing else.”

“Sir?”

“Yes?” Sir Hal turned to the older soldier who had approached with a salute.

“The King has arrived in the clearing with Silvi.”

“Thank you Bernan, we’ll come at once.”

“Sir.”

When the two reached the clearing, they were surprised that Silvi and the King were with Mab-Horin and not Be-Elin.

“Be-Elin has gone to rest at the Tor,” explained Mab-Horin. “She has been taking Silvi and Edver all over Fevindor today and is exhausted. We all are, to be honest. I’m just going to check on your Calons.”

“Thank you, Mab-Horin.” Sir Hal nodded to the strong, young dragon who had spread his wings and flew back out of the clearing. “Well, brother? What is the final count?” They had already received news of the victory and the tragic death of Major Deffane and the other archers.

“We have four hundred and thirty dead on our side,” replied Edver. “They have lost just over eight hundred and the rest have fled back into Tulinor. Mab-Pelin and Kaffor are tracking them, but we haven’t heard back yet.”

“Your people and the archers have had a major victory, Silvi,” Sir Hal told the young woman. “Despite the terrible cost. Thank you.”

“I fear it will be in vain if we cannot stop those attacking here,” she replied.

“We will do everything to stop them; that I promise.” Sir Hal knew the odds were against him, but he had faith in his irregulars.

“Brother, I am not going to put you in the position of being the last stand,” said the King to the knight. “Or, more to the point, Silvi has decided she will not. We have been rallying as many of the people as we can, and those who carry bows will be meeting us at Kam on the banks of the River Lev.”

“How many?” Sir Hal asked Silvi.

“We don’t know yet, Hal,” she said honestly. “We have been flying to each village, and we have sent twenty scouts out on the roads to make sure people know where they are going and know that we still want them. We have also been to Given, and they are sending out their own messengers to northern villages. They are too far away to help, but they should be warned.”

The tall, fair-haired knight looked at the short, tough girl, face streaked with dirt and sweat, eyes hard. Before he could stop himself, a vision of his sister swam into his head, and he looked away quickly.

Edver frowned. “Silvi, Major, could you give us a few minutes?”

“You look like you need coffee,” said Major Mennon to Silvi.

“Thanks. Yes, I do.”

As Mennon and Silvi left for the main camp, Sir Hal let out a breath. “Just occasionally she catches me out.”

“I know, brother,” said Edver, putting his hand on the knight’s shoulder. “You have an enormous problem to your east.”

“I don’t know if I can win, Edver, even though I keep saying we can.”

“Silvi shares your concerns, Hal. Enough that she started threatening to shoot people in Sonaton this morning.”

“Really?”

“Well, a bit more complicated than that. I watched Silvi change today, brother. After Deffane was killed, she was distraught, but she pushed it away and took charge, even of Nolen. This morning, she stood in that square, angry and hurt, but everyone listened to her. We know that at least some of the town folk are heading to Kam. We don’t know how many yet.” The king looked up at the sky through the trees. “You know, if it was not for the dragons, we would already have lost this fight. However grateful I am for their help, I am concerned that we have been so vulnerable and could not have done this on our own.”

“I know, Edver, but I would hate to see us turn into some military country paranoid about our borders, keeping an army far bigger than we can afford. It doesn’t feel right.”

“We have to do something. I keep coming back to the complaints from some of our friends that we do not know enough about our neighbours, or even about our region. We must talk to other countries, those who will listen. This lack of knowledge is ridiculous. It’s the same with our weapons.” The king drew his new, simple blade. “This is much stronger than my magnificent kingly blade, yet it took a dragon to point out how weak our metal was and one of our own blacksmiths, a maker of ploughs, to solve the problem. Problem and solution right under our noses and we didn’t see it.”

“We didn’t know to look, Edver. That is the point that Be-Elin keeps making. We have shrunk. Our society is less than it was. Not just us, but our enemies too. We have to win against the Calons, but then we must change and change faster than we have been doing over the last year.”

“What do you think about Be-Elin, Hal?” asked Edver. “Silvi is one of us. I don’t mean human, I have learned the mistake of splitting them up like that, but I mean she is from our time, born now. The dragons are from a different land and Be-Elin is from a different era. I am not sure her plans are the same as Silvi’s.”

“I don’t know, brother. I trust her, and I believe Silvi when she says that lying and deceit is not something that dragons do. But is she telling us everything? No, I don’t think so. I am not going to worry about it now, though.”

“You are right. And I can hear an approaching dragon,” said the king with a smile.

Mab-Horin landed lightly and stepped towards the brothers. “Is the Dragon Leader here?” he asked formally.

“Who?” asked Sir Hal.

“A few things changed today,” explained the king. “She is getting coffee, Mab-Horin. Do you want me to fetch her?”

“If you would, Edver. I want to ask her about a night raid.”

“We had been planning one,” said Sir Hal. “But they have camped so far from the forest that we don’t think we can cover the ground undiscovered.”

“You are right, and they have a lot of patrols out on their camp perimeter, Hal, but dragons have good night sight, well some of us. We can certainly give them a bad night’s sleep.”

Sir Hal chuckled as the king left for the camp to fetch Silvi. “Mab-Horin, I would welcome any help at this stage, to be honest. May I ask a question?”

“Of course.”

“You call Silvi Dragon Leader?”

“Yes. When Be-Elin was young in the Sand Hills, there were always two leaders of the riders and fighting dragons; not of the general population, that was different. One was a rider, and one was a dragon. But one of the two was always the Dragon Leader. From when we first arrived, Be-Elin and Silvi have been in charge, but last night the riders and the dragons decided that Silvi should be our Dragon Leader.”

“Not Be-Elin? Silvi is the youngest of all of you.”

“That doesn’t matter. She is the strongest, and we all want to follow her, including Be-Elin.”

“And what did she say?”

“We didn’t get around to telling her,” said Mab-Horin, chuckling. “She was quite vocal about that this afternoon. Dragons are not always very good at doing the right thing in the right way. We tend to just do things and wait to see what happens. None of us were brought up with humans, and we are still learning.”

“So are we, Mab-Horin. Well, despite that she really is very young, I think you have chosen well. Do dragons and riders look after their leaders?”

“We all look after each other.”

“Good. She is precious to my brother and me.”

“We know, Sir Hal. Dragons also have splendid hearing.”

“Oh, I see. Have you said anything to Silvi?”

“No. But I will if she asks. Was your sister beautiful?”

“The most beautiful person in our lives, Mab-Horin. We miss her much, but we miss her fondly.”

“I understand. You should tell Silvi though.”

“Why? It’s not her fault she reminds us of Geniva.”

“Because she hates people being dishonest with her. She found hiding who she really was from you tough; it is not something that comes naturally to her. In some ways, she is very dragon-like.”

“I hadn’t thought about that.” The knight took a deep breath. “I will tell her. She should know more about us anyway. She treats us like friends and yet she knows nother about our family or us.”

“You have a family, Sir Hal?”

“I don’t, but my brother has a wife and two young children, and we have a couple of aunts and uncles and their families. None of them are involved in the running of the kingdom or use titles; we are trying to move away from all that.”

“Mab-Horin!” called Silvi, trotting into the clearing followed by the king.

“We should plan a night raid, Dragon Leader,” said the dragon.

“I agree. And I must plan for tomorrow too. Edver, if you are ready, we should fly up to the Tor and then to Kam. Hal, you have a gaggle of knights in your forest.”

The knight burst out laughing. “I think it’s a Banner of Knights, though gaggle works.”

“Are you using them?”

“I’m holding them in reserve.”

“Well, if you decide not to use them, will you send them to Kam?”

The knight nodded and very deliberately pushed back the image of his young sister. “Yes, Dragon Leader.” He put out his hand. “Good luck, and please look after my brother.”

“I will, Sir Hal,” said Silvi, taking the knight’s hand. “And good luck to you. I will send a message once I know what Mab-Horin has planned.”

“What was that about?” Mennon asked the knight as the dragon, the king and the Dragon Leader left the clearing.

“That was me learning a valuable lesson from Mab-Horin, Mennon. If the dragons believe she has what it takes to lead them, despite her few years, then I must stop worrying about how young she is.”

The raid was short, vicious, and imaginative. Just after midnight, with the moons low on the horizon, eleven dragons dropped eleven bags of rocks, and eleven large barrels of lamp oil. The riders ignited them using the small ceramic bangers, a lesson learned from the Fevin Hills; flaming arrows had been unnecessary. Then, for the next hour, the dragons passed high over the camp, roaring and trumpeting, even laughing as they dropped all the waste they had been able to find; rotten meat, bags of rotten vegetables, and dung. It wouldn't have affected the numbers much, but the soldiers from Calon would have been very short of sleep that night. Come dawn, the Calon army was already awake, decamped, and marching towards the forest through a thick mist.

“They are certainly early risers!” said Sir Hal. He and Major Mennon were hiding behind ferns on the edge of the forest watching the Calon Army trooping towards them up the road; dim shadows flickering through the misty dawn light from Dirt's old sun.

“I slept badly anyway,” said Major Mennon. “I am not sure what the dragons did last night, but it was noisy, even at this distance.”

“Can you imagine what those battles must have been like when Be-Elin was young? Some of those had two hundred and fifty or more dragons involved; all roaring and shouting and dropping bags of rocks filled with desert fire.”

“I can imagine not getting much sleep.”

“Mennon, you are miserable first thing in the morning, you know that?”

“I'm just choosy about how I am woken up, sir.”

“I'll remember that. Right, major, I'm going back to my company. As soon as the last of their troops pass this point, light them up.”

Sir Hal had split his battalion in two. The main force was waiting farther up the trade road that ran through the forest and on up towards Levin Burh, and the smaller force was under the command of Major Mennon, hidden deeper in the woods either side of the road.

“These better bloody work,” muttered Mennon to himself as the end of the Calon line filed past his position on the road. The morning mist had turned into dense fog, especially across the moorland where the Calon army had been camped, and he and his soldiers had heard rather than seen most of the enemy.

“The one we tested earlier worked like a treat, sir,” commented his sergeant.

“Even Messin has warned some may not go off. Right, sergeant, set it off; everyone will take their cue from your fire. If they can see it through the fog!”

“Sir.”

Mennon stood back while the sergeant lit the fuse and the two moved quickly towards the road. Behind him, he heard the fuse fizzle momentarily and everything went silent. One, two, three. The blackdust exploded with a crack, and the flaming desert fire sprayed into the foliage, sticking to leaves and branches and burning with a fierce white-yellow light through the mist.

“Now we wait,” said Mennon to his sergeant.

“Sir.”

Up along the length of the road, every fifty paces, Mennon’s soldiers lit their incendiaries, each just twenty feet back from the marching lines of Calon infantry. One after another, every few seconds, they exploded, the fires roaring into life, igniting the piles of dry timber stacked around the trees, the flames shooting up into the canopy. The tail of the Calon lines broke formation within seconds and started pushing forwards in panic as Mennon’s irregular platoons dropped flaming trees across the road, blocking any retreat.

Then, from the flames and the smoke, hundreds of Hertenessey soldiers jumped out from their hiding places and assaulted the rear end of the column. Mennon and his sergeant ran up from their trailing position to join their troops, pulled their swords, and attacked the rear.

“Push them!” shouted Mennon. “Make them run!”

It didn’t take much encouragement. With the forest alight, turning the road into a flame-lined avenue, the Calon infantry broke into a run headlong into the waiting swords of Sir Hal’s company. They had the frightened Calon troops trapped, but still they were vastly outnumbered, and the bodies started piling up.

“Their swords are crap!” shouted Mennon with glee, his new blade breaking that of the soldier he faced. He hacked the man across the throat. “Be-Elin, I love you!”

“Charge!” roared Sir Hal as the Calons swarmed into his clearing, the flames chasing them up the road. The armies hit like an earthquake, and the ambush, fully sprung, disintegrated into a brawl.

Three for one. That is what Sir Hal had told his troops the night before. “Don’t die before you have killed three of theirs!” he had shouted. “Three for one!” they had shouted back. Now they took up the chant again.

“Three for one, three for one, three for one!” The Hertenessey soldiers, men and women from across the kingdom, fought with every breath for those they loved, that which they wanted to protect, and for the land that was theirs. And the Calons died. Mercenaries, opportunists, thugs, bandits; no love, no loyalty, just greed, and they were being slaughtered. But for every three Calons that died, at least one Hertenessey also died, often two, and sometimes three. It was like a game of chance. Every bloody piece swept from the board left each player weaker.

Three for one. Sir Hal slid his new, simple, sharp sword into the guts of the man in front of him and kicked him away with a foot. Three for one? He looked around through the mist and the smoke, rubbing his aching and bleeding head where someone had hit him hard. He was dizzy and exhausted, even feeling sick, but he was alive, just about. Something was wrong.

“Sir Hal!”

“Mennon!”

The major came staggering through the smog, bleeding all over and supported by his sergeant.

“Bloody hell, man!” shouted Sir Hal.

“Hal, I mean, Sir Hal,” gasped Mennon. “I’m alright. My arm is broken. Oh, and a few other things. Sir Hal, there wasn’t enough of them!”

“There are dead everywhere.”

“Not enough. We should all be dead. We knew that. There are meant to be four thousand Calon soldiers. Where are they? Three for one, we said.”

Sir Hal looked around him. Corpses littered the forest. Calon mercenaries and Hertenessey soldiers. Yet some were alive, and none of those were Calons. Mennon was right. “Bloody hell. Messenger!” roared Sir Hal. “Someone find me a bloody messenger!”

The mist had cleared. The Dragon Leader stood next to Edver, King of Hertenesse, as villagers began to arrive. Kam was a small village at the junction of the road running north-west to Given and the capital Riena, and the road from Sonaton. The River Lev was only twenty feet wide and shallow, but for Silvi and the King it was their line in the dirt; this was as far into Hertenesse as they were prepared to retreat.

“Silvi!” called Losa, running up to the young woman. “The knights!” Along the road, out from the forest, galloped the two hundred knights.

“Sire!” called the leader of the knights, his horse skidding to a halt. “Message from Sir Hal.”

“Speak, man,” ordered the king, knight to knight.

“They have defeated those that invaded the forest, but it was only half the force, sir, probably less.”

“Half?”

“Sir Hal has lost an enormous number of soldiers, sir, but it was over too quickly. He is certain the Calons have split their force in the fog.”

“Mab-Horin!” shouted Silvi, walking back to where four of the dragons waited. “The Calons have split their force. Find them.”

“Right away, Dragon Leader!” The four dragons leapt into the air and vanished up into the sky with a whoosh of their great wings.

“Sir Knight,” said Edver. “We defeat them here, understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Full armour and lances. Bring some for me too.”

“Sir.”

“Be-Elin!” said Silvi returning to the king’s side. “We have no rocks for you here.”

“It doesn’t have to be rocks. The big reds used to throw trees.”

“Big reds?” asked Edver.

“Some of the Draig Mynyth Coh are three times my size, Edver,” explained the dragon. “They used to pull up and throw entire trees. I’m talking about those massive firs. I can’t do that, but if we can fell some smaller trees and clean them up, we can throw those.”

Edver laughed. “Everything in Kam appears to be made of wood, so I am sure they have axes. I will start them chopping down trees.” He trotted back into the village.

“He and his brother both remind me of Farthing sometimes, girl,” commented Be-Elin.

“In what way?”

“I loved your ancestor more than anyone else, Silvi, but he was not perfect. He was abysmal at delegating and would just go and do things himself. It used to drive Ben Lowen up the wall.” She chuckled. “I miss him, little girl.”

“I know you do, Elin. We are going to win, you know.”

“Of course we are!” Be-Elin stood straight and roared. “Farthings always win!”

It was more than an hour later when three of the dragons returned.

“Sir Hal was right,” reported Mab-Horin. “The Calons must have split their forces in that early fog. There must be at least two thousand coming this way. They have skirted around the south-west of the forest. I have sent Be-Laka to get more information from Sir Hal.”

“How far away are the Calons?” asked Silvi.

“Four or five hours, I reckon,” said the young dragon to his Dragon Leader. “They are marching at a steady pace. I think these are the better-trained troops.”

“They have thrown away the green troops,” said Edver, walking up to the dragon. “You take the least experienced and the youngest, and you throw them at the enemy knowing they will all die. Then you hit the enemy with your best fighters.”

“That is horrible!” said Silvi, turning to stare at the king.

“Yes, it is, Silvi,” he said. “It’s what you get when armies are commanded by absolute rulers like me.” His voice was bitter and hard, and Silvi’s mouth dropped open. “Don’t be surprised that I don’t always like being king. Kings are cruel; it’s the easiest way to do the job.”

“Which is why Pree’s Army spent so much time trying to destroy absolute rulers and what they stood for,” said Be-Elin, walking up to the king. “And it’s why Pree will always live and breathe while I am alive.”

King Edver cast a wise eye on the dragon. “Thank you, Be-Elin.”

“What for?”

“For telling me the rest of the reason why you are here. You have come back to finish what Pree started.”

Be-Elin nodded. “I was driven from my home by a disease and a divided world. The disease has now gone, but the divided world still exists. My Dragon Leader, Silvi Farthing, and I will put that world together again, but that will mean that you will have to throw away your crown. But will you really do that, King Edver? Will you take that final step? Will you swear to me?”

Silvi looked up at the dragon in shock. Gone was the playful Elin. Gone was even the anger born out of guilt and regret. Here stood an intelligent, sharp, and wise person who had waited five hundred years to ask this question. The voice was quiet, resolute, and ached with need.

“Yes, Be-Elin. I will throw away my crown; I swear to you I will.” King Edver, the last king of Hertenesse, looked her in the eye. “But I will not throw away my sword till my people are safe.”

Be-Elin bowed her head in respect to the man stood before her. “My rider and I have indeed chosen the right country to begin our journey.”

“You did not know before?”

“I was not certain, no. I had to see clearly and honestly what was behind the man. Dragons do not understand the subtleties of the human sometimes; we often cannot see through your lies. Human promises and dragon promises are not always the same thing, and my people have been let down before.”

“For that I am sorry,” said Edver. “I do not know your people, not properly, but the little I do know speaks of an honesty and openness that I wish I saw more of in my own kind. You have my promise. If to build a better world I should be nothing more than a sword, then that is all I will be.”

“We will hold you to that, Edver. But for now, we will fight and, if need be, we will die.”

“Not flying?” Tellor walked up to Silvi where she was standing on the banks of the River Lev. In the distance, a cloud of dust was rising above the trees from the Calon army marching towards them.

“Be-Elin doesn’t need me for this and I can shoot better from the ground.”

“Me too!” said Tellor with feeling. The archer’s fear of flying had now nearly made it into song.

“We haven’t met, Captain Tellor,” said the king from where he was standing on Silvi’s left. He held out his hand to the archer.

"Your majesty," said Tellor, shaking the hand.

"Sir Edver today, Tellor. I am just a knight until we beat back these mercenaries and bandits."

"How many have arrived, Tellor?" asked Silvi, taking the older man's arm in her own and resting for a second on his shoulder.

"Four hundred from the villages," he said, gripping her hand fondly. "Be-Serine says she has seen more coming up from Sonaton, but she doesn't know how many."

"She seems to have a problem with numbers," said Silvi with a smile. "I hope there is a lot of them. They don't owe me, but they owe it to themselves." To her surprise, the king suddenly put his arm around her and kissed her on the top of her head.

"Edver?"

"I will explain later, Silvi. But thank you for coming to Hertenesse."

"We need more than that!"

"We are cutting them down as fast as we can, dragon!" yelled the big forester at Be-Elin.

"Sorry!"

"Are all you dragons so bleeding demanding?"

"Only the ancient, tubby ones," said Mab-Corin with a laugh. "Leave the poor man alone, lover girl!"

"All charm, no brain," hissed Be-Elin at the young dragon.

"Want to go hide behind a tree with me?"

"Oh, shut up!" said Be-Elin with an embarrassed chuckle. "Don't look so shocked, axeman!" she told the forester. "Dragons like it too, you know!"

"Pity you don't know how to wield an axe then," he said grumpily, and swung his axe into another innocent tree. "Bloody dragons."

"Room for an old mayor in your line, Dragon Leader?"

"Welcome, Mr Mayor!" said Edver with a grin.

"Sorry, your majesty, I did not see you there."

"By general agreement, we are dropping the majesty bit today."

"As you wish, sire."

"You are very welcome, Mayor Blinton," said Silvi, shaking the mayor's hand. "I probably owe you an apology."

"You don't, Dragon Leader. You were right. We knew the danger, and we were ignoring it. It was just far enough away to not feel like our problem yet."

"How many are with you."

"Three hundred, I reckon. Though half of those have hardly shot a bow at all. They are here anyway."

"Why?" asked Silvi.

"They are scared, Dragon Leader."

"Please, call me Silvi."

"With pleasure, Silvi. They are scared because you scared them."

"I meant to."

"Well, don't stop scaring people. I think we need it."

"Sorry! Excuse me!" Losa pushed her way through to the front.

“Losa, what are you doing?” Silvi grinned at the woman as she planted herself next to her Dragon Leader followed by the other dragon riders.

“Our dragons have told us they don’t need us for throwing trees, so we have come to join you.”

“How many arrows have we got?”

“Lots. Kaffor and Correni have brought everything and everyone from the burh.”

“A true last stand!” declared Edver, laughing.

“No, Edver,” said a small leather-clad woman from somewhere behind. “Your first stand.”

“Perhaps,” said the king over his shoulder.

Ahead of him, two thousand soldiers from the Calon camp stopped and formed a broad line. They drew their swords and marched towards the archers and citizens of Hertenesse. “Are they in range yet?” asked the king.

From behind him, a bowstring twanged, and two arrows flew high into the air in a great arc and took out two soldiers through the neck. “Well, they are for me,” said the woman.

“Loose arrows!” shouted Tellor.

“Keep chopping!” roared Be-Elin as she and her flight of dragons leapt into the air, each carrying a tree trunk.

“Hit them from the rear!” shouted Mab-Horin. “Keep away from our own arrows.”

“Low and fast,” commanded Be-Elin. The dragons flew high over the trees and around to the back of the enemy lines. “These are not the same as the rock bags; the faster we fly, the more effective they are. Give them a bit of a forward spin when you let go.”

The dragon flew right up into the wispy clouds then snapped her wings in and dived towards the Calons like an arrow. Barely one hundred feet from the ground she punched out her wings and flew towards the line so fast the wind screamed over her body. Then she threw her legs forward, the trunk spinning into the men below, knocking them aside like a farmer scythes a field of corn. One after another, the ten dragons followed their leader then returned to the axemen.

“Damn, she is so good!” roared Mab-Horin.

“Aim higher,” shouted Tellor. He and Silvi had left the front line and were marching up and down the lines of civilian longbows, correcting their aim, slowing them down, encouraging them and helping them in every way they could.

“Like me!” shouted Silvi to a line of farmers from Onin. She pulled her bow and aimed high into the air. “Hold it!” she told them. “Fire!” The arrows flew in a deadly arc towards the enemy lines. “Just like that, keep it going!” she shouted. From behind her somewhere she heard an almost impossible twang of fire from someone and three arrows rocketed toward the enemy lines. “Just like that!” she shouted at the farmers. “Impressive!”

“Knights to the fore!” Edver had stolen Silvi’s Horse and was leading his knights. “Lances ready?”

“Ready, sire!”

“Charge!” The huge war horses bucked into a gallop, their hooves pounding on the ground as the Calons neared the river. The king took them wide and into the enemy flanks so Tellor and Silvi and their archers could continue to fire. The war horses picked up the pace and the knights leant forward, lowering their sharpened lances, ploughing into the enemy soldiers.

“Retreat and reform!” shouted the king, and they pulled out from the lines and galloped back towards the trees.

“Follow the knights!” roared Be-Elin. As the horsemen rode their steeds at the flanks once more, the dragons dived from above, their sharpened talons stretched out in front of them. Be-Elin snatched two soldiers from the ranks and smashed them together, their skulls cracking with the force. Mab-Horin and Mab-And grabbed two more and threw them high into the air.

“By the gods!” shouted the king, seeing for the first time the true power of the dragons. “Swords out!”

“Lower your aim!” ordered Silvi. The lines were but fifty paces away and she drew her two fighting knives.

“Ready, girl?” asked Tellor, standing next to her.

“I am with you, Silvi,” said Horan from her other side.

“I am with you too,” said Sir Nolenn, sliding his sword from his scabbard.

“I am ready,” said Silvi. “Thank you.”

A hand touched her on her shoulder and a strangely familiar voice, a voice from her childhood, whispered to her.

“Yes, you are ready, Silvi Farthing. Go get them, girl.”

“Charge!” screamed Silvi, and those with swords raced across the shallow river and crashed into the ranks of the enemy army.

Time slowed.

For the briefest moment, Silvi felt a cut across her shoulder, but though it was the last wound she would suffer, it would be the least of the horror she would witness. She whirled into the lines, her knives slicing and killing and maiming. It was like she had run into a waterfall of blood. Around her, fighters from all sides were killing and dying, wounding and bleeding, gutting and severing. She cut the throat of one man while she watched his sword cut the hand from one of her own comrades. She saw Tellor run a man through with his sword and then headbutt another, the blood spraying across her. She saw Kaffor grab one man by the throat and slice into his stomach, and then watched numbly as the beautiful Losa was gutted by a pike. Silvi heard the roar of the dragons above her, plucking soldiers from the fight like feathers from a chicken and killing them instantly. She sliced a soldier up the arm and across the face with one knife, and castrated another with her second knife. She heard Edver Kellin bark out commands as he and his knights trampled and gouged and killed, Horse rearing up and smashing the heads of those who attacked.

And then, in the distance she heard a rallying cry from the remaining forces from the forest. The bandaged and limping Sir Hal led them into a charge on the rear of the enemy lines. There was no chance now they would lose. The greed of the Calon army would not defeat the passion of the people of Hertenesse. Then, from the midst of the fray, Silvi heard the enemy commander shouting orders to his soldiers. The tone was unmistakable. It could have been Deffane or Mennon or Nolenn or Sir Hal. Silvi growled and hacked her way to the voice, the tall soldiers ahead of her falling as she cut upwards and through.

“Got you, you shit” shouted Silvi at her target. “Now you die!”

The commander of the Calon Army turned towards her and lifted his sword ready to hack the woman apart.

“Never!” roared a great voice from above. Be-Elin smashed him into the ground while Silvi gutted him. “On my back, girl!” shouted the dragon. Silvi jumped up onto Be-Elin and grabbed her beautiful rider’s bow from the dragon’s back.

“Roar, Be-Elin,” she shouted. “Roar for the people of Bind. Roar for all of us!”

And the dragon roared as she flew into the air, joined by the ten young Draig yr Anialr. And they all roared, the sound echoing across the field as the villagers dropped their bows and ploughed into the ranks of the Calons, kicking and punching and hacking. The foresters ran from the trees, swinging their great felling axes, and the farmers attacked with their scythes and their shears.

And the Calon lines broke.

The battlefield fell to a deathly hush and the few remnants of the Calon army backed away, horror and fear drawn with blood on their faces. Then from the sky came a howl of grief, and two dragons crashed down into the sea of dead.

Silvi turned and watched in agony as Mab-Horin and Be-Laka lifted their dead riders from the blood and clasped them to their bodies. Never had the people of Hertenesse seen such raw grief, and many slumped to the ground amongst the dead and grieved for their own while the remaining Calons fled the field. Silvi leant forward and touched Be-Elin on the neck.

“Take us down,” she said. “We must comfort them.”

Be-Elin landed in front of the two heartbroken dragons. She stepped forward and pulled them close with her wings and Silvi reached up, touching them on their faces.

“Take them,” said Be-Elin. “Take them to the Tor.”

The two dragons flew from the field, over the trees, and up to the hills above Levin Burh.

Silvi stood beside Be-Elin. Her leathers were drenched in blood, and one of her knives was broken.

“We did it, Silvi,” said Tellor. “We stopped them.”

“Yes, we did it, Tellor.” She looked up into his eyes. “And we will have to do it again. Bind is full of people like that.”

“I know.” The archer wiped his sword on the coat of a dead Calon. “I will be at the pub later,” he said, walking from the field.

“I must go to them, girl,” said Be-Elin. “They don’t know what to do.”

“Go. I will ride up on Horse.” The dragon leapt into the air and vanished into the clouds followed by the remaining young Draig yr Anialr.

“He is a bit battered, but he did brilliantly.”

“Sorry?” Silvi looked up to see Edver walking towards her leading Horse, Sir Hal limping along by his side.

“Your horse. He has been a noble steed. Thank you.”

“I ... he is a good horse. A bit of a friend.” Silvi felt the numbness coming over her, and she staggered slightly.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Edver stepped forward and held her.

“Sorry.” The young woman hung onto him tightly. “I think I’m tired.” She pushed herself straight again and found herself wrapped in two pairs of strong arms. Silvi could hold herself back no longer, and she wept in the arms of the two knights who wept with her, surrounded by the two thousand from both sides who had died in less than an hour.

Tellor was on his fourth jug when Silvi walked up to the counter in the White Pony and sat next to him. Hilda poured a mug of wine from the barrel and set it before the girl without a word.

"You cleaned up," said Tellor.

"In the river," replied Silvi. "I couldn't leave with all the... with all that on me."

"I am sorry for your friends. For our friends." Tellor raised his pot and Silvi touched it with her mug. "I couldn't stay. I'm sorry."

"They told me."

"What?"

"Edver and Hal. They told me about their sister."

"Oh."

"You knew?"

"The dragons overheard them talking. Mab-Horin told me."

"He didn't tell me."

Tellor chuckled. "That must have taken some doing. Dragons are very bad at keeping secrets."

"Not bad enough." Silvi's voice was flat. "Have you ever seen anything like this? Like today?"

"No."

"I stopped and threw up in the river coming back from the tor," said Silvi.

"I have thrown up three times so far," commented Tellor with a sigh. "I think I will only stop when I get too drunk to think."

Three small glasses of whiskey appeared on the counter. "You won't forget death with beer and wine, loves," said Hilda. "Here, have the bottle. I will join you."

The three of them had drunk a bottle and a half when Annila, the girl who delivered the milk, walked into the Pony.

"I heard," she said, walking up to Silvi. "Everyone heard. You saved us."

Silvi looked up at her. "No, you saved you. All of those people who came from the villages and fought. They saved you. Those that didn't die."

The girl looked down and nodded. She knew about the death too.

"Come on!" said Silvi, and grabbed the girl by the hand, dragging her up the stairs. By the time they reached her room, Silvi had pulled off her jacket and shirt. She pushed the shocked and laughing girl onto the bed and straddled her, undoing the girl's shirt, her hands shaking more and more as she went from button to button.

"Hey!" said Annila, holding Silvi's hands. "Careful, lover."

Silvi looked up into the girl's warm face and tried to smile, but couldn't. She screwed her eyes shut in pain.

"Come here," murmured Annila, and pulled the crying young woman down beside her, wrapping her tightly in her arms. She kissed her on the brow gently and stroked her head. "No rush, darling. No rush."

Annila had not intended to stay the night, but she couldn't leave. Her beautiful friend didn't stop crying until dawn.

"Why are we in these bloody dark and damp catacombs again?"

"You are so sodding fussy!"

"Well, I don't get a choice where you drag us."

"Of course you don't, old man. You are just a memory."

"Less of the old man. You are five hundred years old yourself now, you know. Still getting the looks, I notice."

"What do you mean?"

"What that young bloke on the island? Would have stripped you naked in a breath."

"Not and lived."

"So violent!"

"Well, a girl has got to have standards."

The memory paused and took a breath. "It's going to have to be war, you know. Are you going to start it?"

"It has begun already, darling man. Ten thousand years ago, or so. We are going to end it."

"And the death? You are not good at death."

"No, I'm not. Not of family."

"You can't protect them. Not this time."

"The dragons will protect them. That is why I've insisted they become riders. The dragons will have no choice."

"That is cruel. Especially to the brother and sister. They were ordered to abandon their first riders. That has never happened before."

"I have no choice, Eafa! I need the bond with Farthing and Pree and with you."

"It is still cruel. Doubly so since you love them. Especially the girl."

The woman stomped down the corridor and lit another torch.

"This is it. This is what I was missing."

"What?"

"I knew that I knew the answer."

"To what?"

"Why the Cwendrina has to be a particular type person and cannot be just anyone."

"Why?"

"Because of you."

"Why is it my fault?"

"It is why you can recognise the Cwendrina, or would have done if that idiot mother of yours had not wrapped you up in a mystical blanket!"

"Charming."

"Sorry. I loved Sen-Liana, but she really did mess up. So did the previous two mates."

"So, what is so special about the Cwendrina then? Why are you saying she has to be a particular person?"

"Not a particular bloodline, but a specific type of person. Because of this." The woman grabbed a cloth from her bag and wiped away the dust from an engraving.

"We have seen this before."

"Yes, two hundred years ago, which is why it's all dusty again."

"Time flies when you are digging around in ancient corridors, my love."

"Shut up! Look at this. It's a woman."

"I can see that. It has tits."

"Why do I love you? I know it has, but it also has the remains of paint on the head. Look."

"I am in your head; you have to do the looking."

"Fine. She has, or had at one point before it wore off a red head."

“Alright, so this is the Cwendrina. We have found Cwendrinas all over the place. These corridors are stuffed with the bloody Cwendrinas!”

“Not this one, they are not. This is the oldest by far. Look at the way it’s carved. Remember that circle of ancients we found? The first Ancients? Same sort of carving, same design.”

“What are you saying?”

“This is not any old Cwendrina, this is the first Cwendrina.”

“So?”

“So, what are those two flappy things doing sticking out of her back?”

“Oh.”

“Now I know Rusty did not have the same added joints as you so could not have had wings, but this engraving is telling a story. You are linked, dear one. Those who became Cwendrinas are linked to you Ancients.”

“Linked how?”

“I don’t know, but you are.”

Chapter 18 - Allies

Nine riders stood in silence on the large paved terrace outside the ruined Hen-Thyn Tavern in Ponack. On the roof above and along the wall stood eleven Draig yr Anialr, wings folded back, heads raised to the east, watching the rising of the sun as their forebears had done centuries before.

“Why? Hertenesse is their home. They should be buried here.” Sir Hal had been upset more than angry.

“They are riders, Hal,” Be-Elin had told him. “They are the first desert dragon riders for half a millennium, and they are the first to die. It is right that they should be honoured in the Sand Hills.”

“And you decided this? You two took this decision?”

“No,” Silvi had explained. “All Be-Elin did was to tell them what used to be. The young dragons and riders decided this for themselves, unanimously, and came and told us of their decision. We didn’t expect it; we expected to honour them on the Tor.”

“But it is a good thing they have done,” Be-Elin had impressed on the man. “It is so very difficult to explain the relationship between a rider and a dragon to those who have not been paired. And more so, the relationship between all dragons and riders. We are a family within a society where traditional family ties are weak. I have watched these riders and young draig so carefully. None of them have been brought up with one another like I was with my human friends, and none of them have had the cocoon of Ponack and the people of the Sand Hills around them. And yet, they have bonded, and that little group up on the Tor is so tight and strong together. This is important to Silvi and to me, but it is more important still to them.”

Silvi had touched the man on his arm. “Hal, they are as close to one another as you and your brother were to your sister. They need to honour their family in their way, just as you would insist on honouring your own.”

“And you Silvi, how will you honour your family?” he had asked.

“My family tried to kill me. Be-Elin is my family now.”

The people from Levin Burh had gathered at the dragon camp to bid their friends a final farewell. The dragons and riders had carried the bodies of Herrin and Losa up to the Sand Hills and they lit a pyre on Mount To-Pon as the sun set to the west. They had then returned to the ancient, sand-filled Tavern, opened the barrels of beer they had brought with them, and had drunk and laughed and cried and joked for the entire night by the light of the moons and just three small oil lamps. It was but a shadow of the celebrations of life that had filled the tavern in days gone by, but each of them imagined what it must have been like, and listened to the many stories told by Be-Elin.

Then at dawn, they fell quiet and stood and turned towards the east. A new day, life reborn, and the death of their friends forgotten. Only their lives would be remembered now.

"I imagined them here with us last night," said Kaffor, running his hand through the dust on the wall. "Have you been here much, Silvi? It's a sad place now."

"Down the path from the Tavern is a small rider's house with two rooms," replied Silvi. "It's my house, and is where I lived and trained before I came to Hertenesse. I still have a few belongings from my old life there, a rug on the floor, bedding on the pallet. Even some bags of dried beans."

"It sounds like you will come back," commented Mab-Horin. The loss of Herrin had wounded him deeply, and the other dragons would watch him and Be-Laka carefully, as families do.

"The stories Be-Elin told you last night were true because dragons do not lie about their friends. I have heard many other stories too; the stories of pain and sorrow and hardship. This was not just a thriving town, it stood for something. Because while over the rest of Bind and Preland dragons and humans grew farther and farther apart, here they grew closer and were only separated in the end by a terrible disease. Every time I come here, I feel it more acutely. But I am so young, and I know so little."

"Will we return?" Be-Elin asked her rider.

"We will have to, girl. I am sure of it." Silvi leant on the wall and looked down at the town spread over the steep, rocky slopes of the hills. Yes, she would like to come back here, she thought. But in the cupboard in her little rider's house were the few things she had brought from Hope, still in the pack Deni and Sarana had given her. She had a dream there unfulfilled, and in quiet moments, it pulled at her heart.

"This time, you cannot keep out of it, Hornan," said Sir Terran leaning back against the wall with his foot up on the table. They were sitting drinking coffee in the kitchen at Weidess Burh watching Ferret argue with the cook over the best herbs to use in a goat stew.

"I feel like I am being pulled along by the nose hairs!" grumbled Hornan.

"That is revolting, dad!" The young son of King Hornan Liander was still on his long, slow road to recovery, slower even than Ferret had predicted, but was well enough to have developed a crush on Anna, the girl rescued from the tragedy of Farnen.

"Revolting and true!" Hornan told his son. "In days gone by young princes watched their kings treated with fawning respect and deference, not pushed and pulled like a stubborn old mule."

"Now we are getting closer to the truth!" said Ferret with a laugh, pushing herself between the king and the prince. "And anyway, being a prince or a king is overrated. Both of you are far too good for that."

"I am beginning to think this meeting in the kitchen is not such a good idea," muttered Hornan.

"That makes two of us!" snapped the cook from the hearth.

"Is there any chance I can drag this onto the serious matter of High Sen and Oben?" asked Terran.

"And the faster the better," added Garron, trotting down the stairs. "Anna, are you hiding in the back room again?"

"Why?"

"Can you pour me a beer while you are in there?"

"Grrr!"

"And by quickly, my liege, I mean by the time I finish my beer. Be-Sula and Lena have flown in from Oben, and there are crowds out on the streets. She says it is confused and getting violent."

"Who have we still up there?" asked Sir Terran.

"Well, a handful of scouts in Oben, but the rest are still in Cothol. We noticed dragons don't tip-toe very well."

"For the bringer of bad news, you are in a very good mood," noted Hornan disapprovingly.

"Sorry. Lena fell off Be-Sula when they landed. I didn't know she could swear like that."

"Which one?" asked Ferret.

"Both, to be honest."

"I am not sure exactly what we can achieve in High Sen," said Hornan. "I am worried that if we ride in like an army, they will think we've invaded. We are already trespassing as it is."

"Well, don't ride in like an army," said Terran with a shrug.

"Mab-Abin says whatever conversation is going to be had, can it be outside, please," said Lena, limping down the stairs. "Shut up, Garron."

"He has a point," said Hornan, standing. "The dragons have a significant stake in this."

"You see, Evan, your father is quite bright really," said Ferret, leading the ten-year-old up the stairs by the hand.

"Garron?" said Anna, appearing with his beer to find the table empty.

"He has gone upstairs. Take it up to him, girl," said the cook from her stew.

"Yes, cook," replied the girl in annoyance.

Anna delivered the beer to the archer then sneaked her way under Ferret's left arm while the shorter prince hogged the Ancient's right arm.

"It is my doing that they are without a leader," said Mab-Abin. "Not that I have regrets about that, but if I can prevent the situation turning into a civil war, I will."

"Does it look that bad?" asked Hornan.

"It was building last night," said Be-Sula. "And they were back in the streets before dawn when we left. Even from the air, I've been able to see the change."

"It's as tense as anything," agreed Lena. "I've been in the tavern I visited last time, and they are very confused. There was no love for their Lord, and little for his late father, but the father left the people alone most of the time, whereas this little git has been wringing them dry. There are already two factions from what I could work out, but I don't see much support for either of them."

"You have been busy," remarked Hornan.

"I just keep talking. It's amazing how people want to interrupt all the time to tell you things."

"Alright, I agree we have to do something, but I am still loathed to ride in there with a hundred knights. And who the hell am I to start poking my nose in?"

"I think the ideal would be to find the leaders of the factions and talk to them quietly," suggested Ferret, always looking for the peaceful solution first.

"If it builds like last night, I think it is already past that point, Ancient," said Be-Sula. "I don't believe you have the time. They could well be fighting before you even find out their names."

“Can we do two things at once?” asked Terran. “Do something to stop them fighting and then call in the factions.”

“Yes, perfect, Terran,” said Hornan, slightly sarcastically. “How do we do the first?”

“We do,” said Be-Sula. “The dragons do, I mean.”

“How?” asked Mab-Abin.

“Just go there and land in front of the palace. The market square is not very big, and it might just break up what is happening now.”

“You’ll scare them to death!” said Ferret.

“Precisely.”

“Actually, it’s a good idea,” said Sir Terran. “With a few modifications. Will you risk flying there with just your standard hides, not armoured up with all the leather you were wearing for the battle?”

“I would,” said Be-Sula.

“Risky, but those leathers are mostly protecting us from people shooting up at us from the ground, so yes,” said Mab-Abin. “Why?”

“If we can change this from scaring them to death, as Ferret said, to just scaring them a little, and then make sure it is helpful rather than angry, then maybe that will work.”

“If we look like we are about to fight, then a fight is what we will get,” agreed Hornan.

“Ferret is right, we need to be able to talk to them, not trigger a civil war.”

“You are talking about making friends,” said Mab-Abin. “You are using Pree’s tactic.”

They all turned to look at the ancient dragon, who in turn looked down at the king. “King Hornan,” said the dragon, speaking with such formality that the man blinked. “Pree built her army and her allies and changed the country by being a friend to those who wanted change, but in return, they had to be her friend too. Many soldiers, volunteers mostly, would swear their loyalty to her by saying their name and telling her they were her friend.” The dragon’s voice had quietened as he recalled the precious and powerful loyalties that had held together such a disparate collection of countries. Even those not party to the conversation stopped and listened. “Today is possibly a turning point, one that I have been waiting for. You can begin to change your world; this fragmented, primitive place that is all that is left of that dream. You can go into Oben today, on my back, and you can promise them your friendship if they rebuild their country as Pree would have wished. They can select a mayor and a council from the factions and learn how to run their country so all benefit not just a few. That is what she and Farthing dreamt. When she died, the dream lived on, but for only a short while. It should have still been alive now, but it isn’t. I believe it’s because the dragons were not here to help see it continue, and society shrank and broke up. Dragons are long-lived and can link together the generations that you humans cannot. If you do that, if you go in true friendship, I will stand with you.”

The King looked up at the tall dragon. “That is why you are here, isn’t it? You are here to bring your rider’s dream back to life.”

“Yes, I am.”

The king took a breath, blew it out slowly, and looked towards his son. “Evan, come here.” The puzzled boy walked to his father and stood at his side. Hornan put his arm around his son’s shoulders. “There is a catch, isn’t there.”

“Yes,” said Mab-Abin. “Pree insisted she would never be a ruler of any country ever. That is what is so important about the law of governance she created, and why she could persuade other countries to follow her dream; she wasn’t a threat to them. If you truly wish to do this, and especially if you want to help other countries, then you must do as you have said you might. The

monarchy ends with you. Your son Evan will never be king. You will not even be mayor of Kend. If you want to change Kend, High Sen, Rissen and other countries, and you wish my help, then you have to swear to me, give me your oath, that you will renounce your crown when the time is right, and you will work to change this land, not just rule part of it.”

“Mab-Abin?” Ferret walked up to the dragon and looked into his face. “What is this about?”

“Oaths are sacrosanct to dragons, Hornan Liander. Be aware of that.” The dragon put his hand gently on Ferret’s shoulder to reassure her.

“I never intended my son to be king, Mab-Abin,” said Hornan. “And my son knows that. But my intention is not my oath, and although I do not fully understand why you ask this of me, I see that it is necessary, and I have to trust I will find out why it is so. But Oben cannot wait for me to seek so many answers, I think. So yes. You have my oath, not as a king, but as a man. When the time is right, Kend will cease to be a kingdom, and my family and I will no longer have any claim to it.”

“Then, Hornan, I suggest we fly to Cothol, collect the rest of the dragons and scare the people of High Sen into peace. Be-Sula, who else is here?”

“Be-Venne and Mab-Tenn,” answered Lena. “Well, Sula never knows where anyone is.”

“Ferret, I want to go,” said Anna suddenly.

“What?” The Ancient turned to the young girl. “I don’t think this is the right time.”

“If she goes I want to go too!” piped up Evan.

“Evan! You are only ten, and not strong yet.”

“I never go anywhere!”

“I want to see what you do,” said Anna. “I want to do something!” The girl’s life rolled between days of denial and nights filled with horrors, but she was fighting back slowly.

“If I can’t be a prince, then what else do I do?” said Evan. “I want to be with you, mum!” The boy blushed in embarrassment, and everyone turned to stare. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean...”

“So do I!” said Anna.

The Ancient looked up at the king in confusion. She hadn’t expected this, and it was so wrong. She knew her life was going to get harder and more dangerous. Come on, girl, she said to herself, you are five hundred years old; think. Ferret leant down and pulled the two children close.

“What we do is dangerous. What I might face may be even more so. I probably won’t even be here most of the time.” The two children just looked at her. Most of those around them knew something of the Ancient, but the children only knew she was a healer and a dragon rider.

“Evan, Anna, do you know who I am?”

“You are Ferret,” said the boy. “You saved my life.”

“The dragons call you Eiferra,” said Anna. “Sometimes they call you Ancient, but I don’t understand why. Is it a joke?”

“Yes, they do. Eiferra is my real name, though I prefer Ferret. I am also what was once known as an Ancient. You know how old Mab-Abin is?”

“Yes,” said Anna. “He is over five hundred years old.”

“Well, Mab-Abin and my mother and father were close friends.”

The two children stared. Then Anna leant forward and touched her face. “You are very beautiful, Eiferra, and maybe you are very old, but I still want to be with you when I can and know you care for me. That is all I want.” Small tears trickled down the girl’s face. “I don’t have anyone else; just you and Sovan. I want to be part of something.”

"I know you are not my mother," said Evan. "Not really. But just sometimes..."

"And when I am on the other side of Dirt and gone for months, maybe years?" Ferret asked the children, tears in her own eyes. "I'm not sure you understand. I cannot be your mother."

"Then we will think about you when you are away," said Anna. "I would like someone I can think about." Evan nodded in agreement.

"Oh, bloody hell," said Ferret and hugged both children.

"Alright, they can come," said Hornan.

"What?" Ferret stood up so fast she nearly knocked Evan backwards.

"If we are going and saying we are friends; then friends we will be. If I am to take my son's legacy away from him, then he should be part of whatever future we are meant to be building. But we better go quickly. Lena, call the other dragons, and we need to leave. We will fly first to Cothol. Terran, Garron, you are coming too. Anna, go tell the cook she's in charge."

"The cook?" The girl looked confused.

"As if I didn't know who my uncle has been having an affair with for the last ten years. Now move, everyone." Hornan headed back into the Burh, dragging his son after him to wrap up warmly.

"That's ten coins you owe me, Terran," said Garron.

"Damn!" grumbled Terran, fishing out his purse.

"You have been running a wager?" Ferret snapped at them.

"Which one called you mum first," explained Garron with a grin.

"You bastards!"

"Everyone ready?" Hornan reappeared with a wrapped-up prince. "Garron, you will have to wait for your twenty."

"Sire," said the archer, grinning. Ferret just stared, open-mouthed.

"And you'll have to wait too, Mab-Abin," added Hornan. "Be-Sula, I will ride with you. Eiferra's charges can ride with her on Mab-Abin.

"Mab-Abin, you are in so much trouble!" Ferret swore under her breath as she pushed the two children onto his back.

"Yes, oh very ancient one," said the dragon, chortling.

"Eiferra, look down," said Mab-Abin as they circled high above the town of Oben.

"What is it?" called out Hornan from where he sat behind Lena. "I can't see properly."

Ferret wriggled forward on Mab-Abin's neck, telling Anna and Evan to hold on tightly, and looked down. "Riot!" she shouted. "People are fighting in the middle of the square."

"Stupid!" snapped Mab-Abin.

"We are carrying the children, dragon boy," Ferret reminded him, guessing what he was about to do.

"I know," he said over his shoulder. "Mab-Hend, Mab-Tenn, Be-Riella, Be-Aina. Go break it up!"

Without a word, the four dragons pulled their wings in and dropped like stones, shrieking at the crowds below. With a crash, the four landed heavily in the square, sending the fighters sprawling and diving out of the way.

"This ends now!" roared Mab-Abin, spiralling down after them. "Put down your swords!"

The four dragons lowered their heads revealing their riders and passengers brandishing their longbows, and then pushed the crowd out away from the palace walls as Be-Sula and Mab-Abin

landed in the middle. Behind them, the remaining dragons flew down and landed in the palace grounds and dispatched the remnants of the old palace guard that were barricading themselves in.

King Hornan Liander slid down from Be-Sula's back, and Lena slipped away quietly to the tavern. Ferret jumped down to join the king, leaving the two wide-eyed children hanging on to the hides.

"What is happening here?" demanded Hornan. The crowd took another step back when Mab-Tenn snapped and growled at two men who had swung their swords at him. "I am not here to harm you, just to know who you are. My name is Hornan Liander, and I am the king of your neighbour Kend.

"We are taking the palace before Lord Bin returns," shouted a man.

"You don't get the palace!" shouted another.

"Fennelle Bin is dead," said Mab-Abin calmly. "I killed him when he tried to massacre the people of Cothol. He and his men."

"Is this true?" asked the first man. "We saw them leave over a week ago. I took the chance to take the town back."

"It is true," said Jene, climbing down cautiously from the back of Be-Riella. "I am from Cothol, and they attacked us with three hundred soldiers to take our women and girls."

"They have taken others!" shouted someone from the crowd.

"We know," replied Mab-Abin. "We will help you find them if we can."

"This is our town now," shouted the second man. "We decide what is done or not done. We don't need no king and his animals."

"Keep your guild out of it, Desson!" shouted the first man.

"It's the guild's right!" yelled Desson, turning on the first man. "The guild built this town, the guild gets to run it. Like it used to be before Bin's family turned up."

"You mean you run it, Desson. That was no guild, it was a bunch of gangs run by your ancestors!"

"They knew how to run this town and this country. We were rich then!"

"Your family were rich then, no one else was."

"Shut up!" roared Mab-Abin. The square fell silent.

Lena returned dragging a very unwilling woman by the hand. "Mab-Abin, this is Bellany, the woman I told you about."

"Bellany," said the dragon gently, aware that he was unnerving people more than he should. "Who are these two men bickering in front of us?"

"Well, sir, the small one is Desson. He runs the market and charges a fortune for pitches. He has been splitting the profits with Lord Bin; well known that is."

"And the other man?"

"He is Reddon. He owns the tin mine up in the mountains, and most of his workers are slaves. That is well known too."

"So, if either of these ended up running High Sen," asked Hornan, walking towards the woman, "what would you say?"

"I would say nothing has changed, sir." Several voices across the square muttered in agreement with the woman.

The king turned to face the two arguing men who had been flanked by dragon riders and Sir Terran and Garron. "High Sen is not my country, and I have no intention of it being my country, but my friends and my soldiers decided to trespass over your borders to stop a massacre which you two men appear to have done nothing to prevent."

“Bin had mercenaries!” objected Reddon.

“He had four hundred, give or take!” Hornan snapped at him. “We wiped them out in twenty minutes! How many men are there in this square alone? No, you don’t care about Cothol or the people there any more than Desson does. You haven’t even asked if any survived! All you two care about is fighting over the spoils, Mr Slaver and Mr Gangster.”

“Sire,” called out Lena. “Bellany says she knows who we should talk to.”

“Who is that?” Mab-Abin looked down at the small woman.

“Jenni, Sir. Jenni Redenwood.”

A couple of people laughed but several more called out her name approvingly.

“Who is this Jenni Redenwood?” asked the king.

“I am, sir.” An older woman walked forward holding a young child by the hand. “My grandson, sir.”

Ferret greeted the woman and touched her hand, smiling slightly. “What is his name?”

“Tripper, miss. His parents died working in the Tin mines. I’m bringing him up.”

The Ancient felt the truth and the pain through her touch. “I am sorry; you seem a good woman. What do you do?”

“I used to be a midwife, but I now own the tavern, miss.” She pointed to the Three Hearts Tavern at the corner of the square.”

“Broke the law, she did!” shouted out Desson. “She took it after her husband died. But she’s a woman!”

“No such law, arsehole!” snapped Bellany, which gained her a cheer from a distinct half of the population. “You want to know why we have not risen up before, sir?” she said to the king. “It’s because of bottom feeders like them two and their cronies. Take the lords coin, our coin, without a second thought until your friend gone and done for him. Now they want to grab it all before we got a chance!”

Suddenly, from behind the dragons came a massive crash, and a short section of the palace wall fell outwards onto the square revealing the young Draig yr Anialr. There was no question about it; they were grinning.

“Not very well built, sorry!” called out Mab-Aud. “Bit old and rotten. We thought that whatever happened next, it probably was not a good idea for this to be used as a fortress any longer.” He looked down at the rubble. “Plenty of spare stone if anyone wants any.”

Jenni Redenwood looked up to Mab-Abin towing over her frightened grandson.

“It’s alright Tripper,” she said to the boy. “He is not here to hurt us. Look who is up there.” The boy looked up to see Anna and Evan, smiling nervously. “You want to say hello to them?” The boy nodded hesitantly, and Anna slid down and knelt in front of him.

“Hello, my name is Anna. This is my friend Evan,” she said as Evan climbed down cautiously. He was feeling drained after the flight, but had enjoyed every minute of his day.

The small boy, no older than four or five, put one thumb in his mouth and pointed at Be-Sula, who was looking down at him.

“This is Be-Sula,” said Anna. “If she lowers her head, do you want to touch her face? She likes that.”

Around the square, the people fell silent watching the strange moment of theatre before them. They had heard about the dragons from traders, but there was little direct contact between the two countries, and the stories were mostly second or third hand, distorted and incomplete. For most, the reality before them was both more wondrous and far more frightening. Now, a

people close to riot and rebellion took a breath and watched as the Draig yr Anialr Be-Sula lowered her tan and cream face down to the ground in front of the smallest of boys.

"Can you say hello, Tripper?" asked Anna. The boy nodded. "Say 'hello Be-Sula' then. But say it nicely; she can be quite nervous." The massive dragon frowned at the girl and tried to look suitably nervous. With a bit of encouragement from Anna, the little boy put out his tiny hand and laid it on the side of the dragon's face. His eyes opened wide in surprise, and he whisked his hand back and spat out his thumb.

"It's warm!" he said.

"Yes, dragons are lovely and warm. Say hello."

The young boy twisted his face a little and looked up at the dragon. "Hello, Bey-Soo!"

"Hello, Tripper," said the dragon softly and blinked her eyes slowly in pleasure.

"Why have you come here?" Jenni Redenwood asked Mab-Abin, her voice strong, despite her age. There was no fear in her face.

"A young man came from the village of Cothol and asked for our help," said the dragon. "Hornan Liander had helped them once before when three of their children were kidnapped. After we had stopped Lord Bin's lieutenant taking slaves, Bin and his forces attacked the village. We defended it."

"Were many hurt?"

"The village leader was killed. Twenty of Bin's men charged him down when he stood alone with an axe. But the rest were saved."

"Thank you. I still do not understand why you would do this. This is not your country, sir."

"Dragons do not have countries, Jenni," explained Mab-Abin. "It was harder for the king here."

"Then, sir, why did you come?" Jenni turned to the king. It was becoming quickly evident why Bellany had suggested this strong woman. She treated everyone as an equal.

"We had not intended to remove the leader of your country, whether he was a good man or an evil man, but we did, so we felt it was our responsibility to help you rebuild."

"And how did you intend to do that with your beasts here?"

"They are not my beasts, Jenni Redenwood, they are my friends. I do not command them."

"The question still stands; how do you intend to help?"

"By offering a hand of friendship to any that show an honest wish to do the best for the people of High Sen."

"I am just a woman," said Jenni.

"I have learned there is nothing just about a woman," replied the king. "The woman there, Eiferra, could outshoot any in this square, indeed she saved my life, and yet she could heal any too. She is also my friend, and I do not command her. I would not call her just a woman."

"We have villagers missing, King Hornan," said Jenni. "Could you help with that?"

"Do you know where they would be?" asked Mab-Abin.

"If I were to guess, they will be at the tin mines with the other slaves controlled by Reddon."

"Mab-Fellon, Be-Heila, take your riders and find the tin mine," ordered Mab-Abin.

"We will go too," said Garron and Terran, climbing up on the dragons. The two desert dragons leapt into the air and were gone.

"You will never get inside," shouted Reddon. "Ow! Shit!"

"You always were a slimy bastard, Reddon," said Bellany, pulling out the hatpin she had just stuck into the man's leg. "Jenni, you ain't just a woman, neither. I am with you!" She walked up and stood beside the older woman and took her hand.

“You got me too.” An older man pushed his way through from the back of the crowd. “My name is Reed, and I am a farmer.”

“He keeps cattle and pigs,” said Jenni. “He has been giving the manure away to local farmers for years and helping them pay their taxes.”

“Well, they’re friends, ain’t they?”

“I’ll help,” said Tally. “I am only young, but I know everyone. I know the goods from the bads.”

“She does at that,” said Reed. “Her old man had a tavern down south of here till the old Lord taxed him dry.”

Slowly, one by one, twelve people came forward and stood with the old woman. They were old and young, men and women from the town and villages up and down the small country of High Sen.

Mab-Abin looked at the thirteen faces and rumbled approvingly. “Have you heard of Pree?” he asked them.

“Of course,” said Reed. “Named this continent.”

“Do you know who she was?”

“Well, not really,” he admitted.

“She was a war leader, the stories say,” said Jenni. “She tried to change the world, somehow.”

“Yes, she did,” said Mab-Abin. “She started with Redust in the east. She deposed the Prelate, and in his place, the people of Redust formed a council. This was not a council of favour or family or wealth, it was a council of the people. The head of the council was the mayor, and they could only serve for five years, then had to stand down. They could not name their successor, and their title could not be inherited; the council would have to choose a new mayor. This was her law of governance, her dream of rule by the people. By the time she died, half of this continent was made up of countries run in the same way.”

“And what of Pree?” asked Jenni. “Did she rule them all?”

“No. She ruled nothing and wished to rule nothing. She just helped each of the countries to run themselves while beating back the threat of the Haften Empire.”

“You seem to know a lot about this woman,” challenged Jenni. “How do I know this is true?”

“Because Pree was my friend, Jenni Redenwood; because I was there.” The dragon looked deeply into the woman’s eyes, and all that watched him had no doubt he told the truth.

The woman stepped away from the dragon and faced Desson, who was being watched over by some men from the tavern.

“We have a choice,” shouted Jenni in a loud voice. “If we form a council of the thirteen of us that have stood up, then that dragon, Mab-Abin, and King Hornan of Kend, are offering us friendship, though we don’t know what that really means. I doubt it means they will give us coin or soldiers or even food. We will not be made rich by being friends nor will our lives be easier. But perhaps it means we have someone we can share our troubles with, someone who will listen to us and someone who will help if they can, rather than spitting in our faces like our own leaders have done for hundreds of years. Or, we can ignore their offer, take sides behind these two men and fight it out.

“We are standing here with swords drawn, and we do not have time to do this any other way. So, all I can do is ask. If you want us to form a council and risk the friendship of these strangers, shout aye!”

There was a single beat and then first one and then another called out “Aye!” Then another person, then another ten, then another fifty. Around the square, the people’s voices echoed, “Aye, Aye, Aye!”

“You bitch!” shouted Desson at Jenni, and drawing a knife, he lunged at her at the same moment that Ferret loosed an arrow and knocked him back onto the ground, dead. Jenni spun around in shock and stared at the Ancient who lowered her bow slowly.

“Thank you,” said Jenni, walking up to the seemingly young woman.

“As I said, you are a good woman.” Ferret paused and looked at the dead man. “I hate killing.”

“I can see that, young lady.”

“Ferret. That is what people call me.”

“Unusual name.”

“I am told it suits me.”

“Ancient, what do I do with this one?” Be-Aina had become fed up, had grabbed Reddon after the knights had left and had him pinned down with a foot.

“I am sure there is somewhere in the palace we can lock him and his friends till we find out what the truth of his mine is,” said Hornan. “Then it will be for the new council to decide. For the moment, Jenni, may I suggest that your people went back to their homes?”

The new council talked most of the night in the palace while the king and the dragons camped in the grounds; partly to offer protection, but also because they should not be part of these opening talks. Just after dawn, Terran and Be-Heila returned, both looking battered and bruised, the dragon sporting a nasty cut to the leg which Ferret dressed.

“What the hell happened?” demanded Hornan.

“We got up to the mine and saw it was guarded,” reported Terran. “We were going to return when they turned up with four young girls and started... Well, anyway we attacked, and we have killed the guards. Sorry, they managed to kill two of the girls before we landed.”

“What about the mine? Is it still guarded?”

“No. When the fight started, the rest of the guards came out. I have never seen dragons fight on the ground before.” The man looked green. “There are no guards left alive, but Ferret you need to come up, and we need other help too.”

“What is up there?” Ferret put her hand on Terran’s face; he was distraught.

“The slaves, girl. It’s horrible. They are half dead and starved.”

“How many?”

“Fifty, hundred? Two hundred? We are not sure. Garron is up there still.” He looked close to breaking. “I have known Garron for years, and I’ve never seen him cry before.”

“Oh, gods,” said Ferret. “Wait there.” She ran inside the palace and returned a few minutes later with Jenni, Bellany, and Tally.

“Are you going now?” asked Hornan.

“Yes. You and two dragons stay here with the children. We shouldn’t all leave here, and they mustn’t come.”

“Reed is going to organise wagons and food and send it up,” said Jenni. “The three of us all have experience with wounds and worse. This has not been a happy place, despite my tavern.” She looked up at Mab-Abin, who was standing above her looking into the sky. “What is it like to fly? I am getting rather old!”

Mab-Abin leant down and dropped his wing. "My rider here is more than four hundred years older than you," he said quite seriously. "I'm sure you will be all right."

Jenni, the woman who had shown such strength and wisdom over the hours, closed her eyes. "He's telling the truth?" she asked.

"Sadly, dragons don't lie," said the Ancient with a sigh. "At least not often." She glared at the dragon who was on her list to shout at.

They spent four harrowing days at the mines. Terran brought more soldiers from Cothol, and they scoured the mine and the surrounding area for guards, and rooted out the few who remained. They took no prisoners, and even Ferret did not question their tactics. Eventually, enough local people came to help so the dragons returned to Oben, bringing Jenni to take up her role as mayor. The town had transformed in the days they had been away, and the market square was empty and silent. When news of the horror discovered at the mines had spread through the taverns and the homes, anger had turned to shame. As many people blamed themselves for doing nothing as condemned their former rulers for committing such atrocities. The problem of Reddon sorted itself out; the man hanged himself before anger became a lynch mob.

"You have an unenviable task ahead," said Hornan to the mayor of High Sen. "I do not know what help I can offer, but ask if you need anything. I think it's important that we keep talking, even if it's only gossip."

"As friends do?" asked Jenni Redenwood.

The king smiled. "Yes."

"You are a king, though, and you rule a Kingdom."

"For now."

"That will change?"

"Yes. I will be the last king of Kend. My son will not take my place."

"That must be a hard thing to do," said Jenni Redenwood.

"It's a relief, to be honest. I have thought about it for many years, but working with the dragons and with Ferret has forced me to face the future and make the decision."

"So what now, King Hornan?"

"I am not very sure, but I am watching Rissen. I believe they were tight with Lord Bin."

"They were, though not with his son, I think. I will watch them too. We have many families here who have relatives in Rissen. It is a poor country and the Lord there spends money on a pointless border war with Siinland."

"I need to ask one thing of you," said Hornan.

"Ask."

"We have kept soldiers at Cothol because the villagers in that region don't want us to go. I can keep them there for a while longer if needed."

"But they know the Lord is dead."

"They do, but that is not the reason. Last winter, bandits from Hebbut raided a village called Farnen in northern Kend. They massacred the villagers and stole several young children. We rescued them but discovered three children who had been taken separately from Cothol, and returned them to their families. That is how they knew about us and why they came to us for help. Unfortunately, they did not know about the massacre in Farnen, and that is where the young man came to find us. It was only luck that he was spotted by one of the dragons. But now they are very nervous about Hebbut."

"I can understand that," said Jenni. "At our first meeting, the council agreed that we would start some sort of force to keep the roads safe so at least we can trade. We will seek volunteers to help those villages too."

"Thank you, Jenni. I must leave, but do not be surprised if you receive regular visits from one or other of the dragons and riders. They take friendship seriously, and more so the fate of those they see as friends."

"Friendship such as you describe has been missing in my lifetime," said Jenni thoughtfully. "Did Mab-Abin truly know Pree?"

"Yes, she was his rider, and the friendship between them was profound. He still grieves for her. He can be difficult to work with sometimes, his honesty can be almost harsh, but talk to him about Pree and General Farthing and what they were trying to build. That it eventually failed long after their deaths is a shame we need to face. Mab-Abin wishes me to help rectify that, and after these few days in Oben, I am now determined I will."

"I will watch for you, Hornan Liander," said Jenni Redenwood, holding out her hand. "Though I fear you have a mountain to climb."

"As do I."

"I do not care what you think your rights are!" shouted King Hornan at Mayor Rothgar of Siinland.

"I am mayor; that gives me rights."

"Not in my castle is doesn't, Rothgar. I repeat; if Siinland wants my help with your borders, then you have to renounce your right to being mayor for life or to nominate your successor."

"You can and do."

"No, I will be the last King of Kend. My son will have no claim, and I will abdicate."

"Why?"

"Because it is right!"

"Then you are a fool, Liander, to give up such power."

"I think not. I think my people would be foolish to let me rule indefinitely, and I think the same of your people and your council. Stand down, Rothgar, change to Pree's Law of Governance and we will help with Rissen, Taaten and Foll as we can. Though understand that I have no huge army."

"You have your dragons."

"And yet again you fail to understand what is happening. They are not my dragons; they are my friends. They do not recognise borders, but they do recognise oppression. There is not a hope in hell they would support the council of Siinland while you are still claiming an absolute right to rule. I have no authority to command them to do otherwise."

"This is ridiculous. I don't know why I listened to my idiotic council and came here." Rothgar grabbed his riding coat from his chair. "I will ride back to Doeen and report that you are turning your back on us."

"As you wish, Rothgar. It seems a pity the fate of a people should rest on the selfishness and self-importance of one man."

Rothgar cursed the king, stormed out of Weidess Burh, and took the road along the banks of the River Wead towards the ancient capital of Siinland.

"That went well," commented Ferret as she and Terran emerged from a side office.

"There is no way Mab-Abin is going to help them while that man and his ego are in charge," said the king, taking a breath to stay his anger. He looked up at his two amused friends. "Do one of you fancy taking a trip?"

"Where to?" asked Terran.

"I thought perhaps the people of Doeen might like to meet a couple of dragons and perhaps the council would too. You could also perhaps, out of politeness, let them know about the conversation I have just had with their mayor."

"It will take him a while to return by horse," commented Terran. "It must be sixty leagues. And he has an entourage of nearly fifty with him."

"Well, it's not my fault that dragons are so much quicker than horses, Terran. And so not my fault they will arrive at Doeen and have lots of time to explain Pree's Law to them before their autocratic mayor gets home with his own story."

"That is very devious, Hornan," remarked Ferret.

"I think Mab-Abin would say it was very honest!"

"Will you tell me another story?"

"It's getting late, little one," said her aunt. "It's already dark, and I have to leave."

"Why?"

"Well, I have a long way to go, and it will take me weeks and weeks!"

"What can be weeks and weeks? Daddy says it is days to Dragon Bay."

"I am going a lot further than Dragon Bay, little lady." The woman poked the four-year-old in the tummy.

"You could always fly," said the little girl with a giggle. "On one of those biggy dragons in the stories."

"They would have to be real for me to fly on them." said the woman, laughing warmly.

"But they are real! I know they are real!" The little girl stuck her chin out and then looked sad. "Are you going away for a very, very long time?"

"I am, darling."

"When will I see you again?"

"I don't know," said the small woman with a mysterious smile. "But I will make sure it is a big surprise!" The little girl giggled. "Now, I must go. Your daddy will be home soon, and your brothers are downstairs. Snuggle in!" She tucked the girl under the quilt and blew out the candle with a big puff. "Sleep well, darling child. Dream beautiful dreams."

The woman slipped downstairs and into the kitchen of the fisherman's house.

"Are you going, then?" asked a rough lad.

"Yes, Den. I will be away for a while."

"Good."

"Problem, lad?"

"Don't know why dad puts up with you. Filling her head with stupid stories about girl heroes. Crap all that stuff."

"Stories are just stories, lad," said the woman, moving very close to the teenager. "But woe betides he who gets between a girl and her dreams," she whispered in his ear, her hand on his chest. "You understand?"

The threat was clear and the lad nodded.

"Good. I like it when people understand me."

She left through the back door and disappeared into the dark. She had known she was overstaying her welcome for a while, and this would have to be her last visit. Still, the girl was not a baby, though very young, and the local women were looking out for her now her mother had died. Breaking into a trot, the woman ran along the coast for several leagues until she reached an old abandoned ruin of a fisherman's hut. Stopping briefly, she touched her hand to the walls. The large black shadow landed with surprising grace and rumbled with pleasure as she climbed onto his back.

"Well?" she asked.

"It is clean," said the voice in her head in its strange language that so few ever understood. "It is safe."

"Then we must find those missing islands in the sea," said the woman. "And in a few years, we will be ready. Then we will bring them home."

As the dragon leapt into the night, the woman took a last glance back at the little building with no roof, no door, and half filled with sand and dust. "Sleep well, darling man," she whispered.

Chapter 19 – The First Step

“Are they not returning at all? asked Sir Hal.

“Be-Laka can’t face returning, Hal. Mab-And and Correni are very close to her, so the three will make a home at Ponack.”

“What will they do, Silvi?”

“There are a few small villages around the Sand Hills, tiny really, but they have had trouble with bandits from the north. They want to stay and help them and find out more about the area. I have visited a village with them, and the people were friendly.”

“Are you alright with this?”

“I think it’s what they need. Be-Laka really is in a sorry state. Be-Elin says it’s because they are so young. Before, dragons did not choose riders till they were seventy or eighty, some not until much, much older. The other dragons are all back, but Mab-Horin is understandably hurting.”

“Well, I am sorry, and I will miss them,” said the knight. “We have had some worrying news while you were gone. Harindad in Calon is in chaos. We think the King has either fled or died, and there is fighting in the capital.”

“I hadn’t realised it was so unstable,” commented the Dragon Leader.

“We are still catching up, but we know that army was mostly hired hands and this Baron, whoever he is, suppressed an uprising in Calon. That much we have found out from the few prisoners we have, but they are all very low ranks, just mercenaries, and any senior officers were either killed or escaped. We know one group pulled out during the last fight at Kam before it ended, but there seems to have been so much infighting at the camp at Calon that we can’t work out what was going on.”

“We do need to know more. That was Mab-Horin’s point before,” said Silvi. “I am tempted to go to Harindad and poke around.”

“That would be dangerous.”

“More dangerous than what we just faced?”

“Possibly not. Who would you take?”

“Kaffor, I think. Mab-Pellin and Be-Elin can then take a look around while we are down there.”

“Take Tellor as well,” suggested Sir Hal. “I noticed how handy he was with his knife and sword, and I think he needs to do something.”

“Yes, several noticed that,” said Silvi with a small smile. “I believe he has been around a bit more than he admits to.”

“Will you ask him about it?”

“After all the secrets I have had to keep, I don’t have the right. How are you doing?”

"I ended up with cuts on my cuts, but I am better than most," admitted the knight. "Mennon is in a bad way, but recovering. We have some that were very severely wounded being looked after in the barracks, and others have been sent home. Silvi, we don't have an army any longer, at least not a very big one."

"You will. Your brother needs to keep knocking on people's doors. They are all frightened now." She chuckled, ruefully. "Well, I am anyway!"

"Backpacks?" asked Kaffor.

Silvi chucked down two packs from Be-Elin's bag to Tellor and Kaffor. "Yes, backpacks. Wandering travellers without horses use them all the time," she said dryly. "We haven't got horses and our friends here have their own stuff to do, so we are walking the next two leagues."

Be-Elin looked up at the clear evening sky. "Well, it's good weather, dragon girl," she commented. "Normal arrangement?"

"Yes, but give us time to get there first."

"What normal arrangement?" asked Kaffor, repacking his clothes into the backpack and sorting out his weapons.

"This is how we worked for months before we arrived in Hertenesse," explained Silvi. "Be-Elin would drop me off while I went looking for information or food in a village and then would check back at regular intervals at a meeting point. It meant she didn't have to hang around."

"I forget you are not from Hertenesse sometimes," said Tellor. "You seem so at home there now."

"More or less," said Silvi evasively. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, boss," said Tellor, just to be annoying. "How do we do this?"

"Run. Come on." Silvi set off at a rapid trot leaving Tellor and Kaffor to catch up.

"She is back to her old self," noted Mab-Pellin.

"No, she isn't, Pellin," said Be-Elin. "That Silvi has gone for good, and I'm going to miss her like mad. Right, young dragon, the first stop for us is their old training camp. Anyone who is still there gets eaten."

"I am sometimes not sure when you are joking, Be-Elin," said the young dragon, leaping into the air after her.

"Well if you want to be fussy we'll cook them first!"

"This is a mess," said Tellor as they peeked out from an alley at the riot.

"It won't all be like this, surely," said Silvi hopefully. "We need to look for the bit where they are not fighting and find an inn."

"Or we head back to the woods and camp," said Kaffor, ducking when a lump of rock bounced off the wall next to him.

"No, we need to talk to people. This town is as big as Sonaton, so there will be somewhere quieter."

They had walked straight into the middle of a fight outside a livery on the main road in the south of the Calon capital, and had run into the alley behind a mill when the fight erupted into a small riot.

"You notice they are not all citizens?" pointed out Tellor as they cautiously moved further into the town. "Some of those are mercenaries or something."

"They are certainly dressed in a similar way to some groups from that camp," agreed Kaffor.

"This way!" hissed Silvi from a little way ahead. "Quieter up here."

As they made their way towards the centre the mood was less angry, and there were signs of ordinary life, but they could feel the tension all around them.

"Are we going right to the centre?" asked Kaffor.

"Not yet," replied Silvi. "See if we can find a poorer quarter or something. Probably to the east."

"Why east?"

"The main road runs north; there is no major road heading directly east."

"Good point," said Tellor. "The money likes to be where the trade passes."

The eastern quarter of Harindad was indeed poorer than the south and was known as The Woods. Most of the houses they had seen in the town were stone, but the structures here were taller, poorly constructed, wooden-framed buildings with shuttered windows and thatched roofs. The Old Mule had certainly seen better days and stank of cheap ale, but the landlord was friendly enough, and he had one room with four cots in it that he was willing to let out.

"Not as nice as your little room in the Pony," commented Tellor, changing quickly.

"Not as safe either," added Kaffor. "It hasn't got Hilda downstairs."

"I will tell her you said that," warned Silvi. "Your rider's discount will soon dry up."

"That is really a dragon discount, you know," said Tellor. "On account of the enormous amounts of light wheat beer she now brews for them."

"Pony and Hilda aside, let's go down to the common room," said Silvi. "Split up down there and leave me to do my thing. Remember, we are coming up from Meressa looking for work."

"Will they believe that?"

"Meressa is one of my favourite places, Tellor, and I have beautiful friends there, but they are very short of work and many people have been leaving. I hope that will change."

"How?"

"If dragons come back, that is one place they will want to move to. They are dragon mad down there with paintings everywhere."

"So why didn't you settle down there?" asked Kaffor.

"I thought about it, but Be-Elin wanted to find a link to the old riders, and a historian there thought they had left Meressa and travelled to Fienland and Hertenesse. Also, from what we can work out, the king of Verron is just letting his land crumble around him. That is the story across much Bind I think; either oppression or just fading away." Silvi stood at the door. "It's going to change." She trotted downstairs watched by the two men.

"Do you think she realises how much blood might be spilt before any change can happen?" asked Kaffor. He was only twenty-four, but his parents had died when he was young, and he had been brought up by a strict, but fair uncle on a tiny smallholding. He had reality stamped all the way through him.

"I think she knows that more than most people," said Tellor. "The difference with Silvi is she is refusing to let it stop her."

Although both men knew Silvi well and had shared her military life over many months, when it came to playing, their knowledge was limited to occasional drunken nights at the Pony and watching her disappear with the odd friend to her small room upstairs. But here, Silvi was in a Meressa mood, and had found a few despondent younger people who she was trying to cheer up, leaving the older patrons to Tellor and Kaffor.

"You are not joking!" said Silvi. "We nearly got stuck in a riot on the way in. I fell over a fence trying to get away."

“Down at the south gate?” asked one lad. “We heard about that. Not as bad as some days. You chose wrong coming here.”

“Not much choosing going on, to be honest,” said Silvi. She had changed her travelling clothes for a loose shirt and skirt, and it was making an impression on a couple of the lads and one of the girls too. “We are just travelling north-ish.”

“Ish?” asked the girl S’rily. She had managed to oust one of the boys and was now sitting next to Silvi.

“Look, we just want work,” said Silvi. “I’m not sure I care where I get it.”

“So, one of those your man or something?” asked one of the other boys.

“No, bloody hell! Just people I knew down in Meressa. They were heading out looking for work so I thought I would join them. Hard for girls travelling on their own and they are nice enough. The older bloke looks out for me a bit.”

“You ain’t going to find nothing here, Silvi,” said Tonen, a tall lad about her age. “The place is falling apart.”

“It’s got to fall, Tonen,” said S’rily. “It ain’t going to be right without falling.”

“They all got crushed last time they tried!” he snapped. “You know that!”

“What happened?” asked Silvi, innocently.

“About a year and a half ago,” replied Tonen. “Load of people led by some of the market traders tried to overturn the king.”

“Nearly did it, too!” said S’rily.

“No, they didn’t. That Baron bloke walks in and crushes all of them. Had them hanging from the trees!” The young man looked angry.

“You knew some of them?” Silvi asked him.

“Yeah, a couple. Friends of my uncle.”

“Sorry, mate.”

“Yeah, well. Shit, isn’t it.”

“But he’s gone now, Tonen,” said S’rily firmly. “Been gone to Hertenesse and got his arse kicked hard!”

“Hertenesse?” prompted Silvi.

“Yeah, country up to the east of us. Good place, we hear. Bloody amazing if they kicked the baron’s arse.”

“He’s not been kicked, girl!” said Tonen. “He’s back here now the king has gone.”

“No, he ain’t!”

“Yes, he is. Where you been?”

“He’s right, S’rily,” said another lad. “He’s been seen in that old warehouse back of the square.”

“What about your king?” asked Silvi. “Isn’t he fighting this Baron bloke?”

“Fighting? They have been partners,” said S’rily, holding Silvi’s arm. “But then the rioters tried again, see, and set fire to the palace. King scarpered, or dead or something. Are you sure he’s back, Tonen?”

“Dead sure, girl.”

“Shit.”

“That really bad then?” asked Silvi.

“Well, yeah,” said S’rily, looking at Silvi like she was stupid. “If he gets people all riled up again, next thing he will bring his thugs in like last time. They raided all the little villages, didn’t they, and like us as well. Took stuff. Took all my mam’s cloth she had. Seamstress she is.

Took it all. We had nothing last year.” The girl looked really upset, and Silvi put her arm around her.

“Don’t you get this down in Meressa?” asked Tonen.

“Well, no. I mean, we got no work, and people are leaving,” said Silvi. “But no one raiding.”

“They will, I bet,” said another lad. “That’s what they do, ain’t it? My granddad said it was the same years ago. He said it is like bulls in our fields. You get one rutting with the whole herd, then another bigger one comes and pushes him off, and he ruts with everyone. That’s all they do to us.”

“And us girls get the worst of it too,” said S’rily. “Those soldier types we got here now, all they do is look and leer. I know what they want and it ain’t my coin.”

Tonen pursed his lips and looked down at the girl he had been arguing with. “Yeah, I seen them too. You keep well away from them, S’rily. You too, Silvi.”

“I will Tonen,” said Silvi. “So, what is this warehouse place?”

“Just that really. His men were using it for a base while he was up at the palace. But the palace got ruined last week so I reckon he is in the warehouse with his men, those he got here. He can’t have many yet, cos they all went up with his army. Still, stay away. You don’t need to go near the market for nothing. You need any food; you stop at any of the farms. They are desperate to sell stuff; cheaper too.”

“I will, thanks.”

“You going to go to Hertennesse, then?” asked S’rily.

“Might do. Or get away completely. Further north maybe.”

“Don’t know much of what is up north,” said the girl. She looked down at the table. “I want to get out of here too. Can’t though. My mam is still struggling after last time.” She leant on Silvi’s shoulder.

The rider sighed. She was sweet this girl, but this was the wrong time and the wrong place, and Silvi was going off playing. She gave the girl a quick hug and then said she wanted to get some sleep since she thought she might be leaving early, and slipped upstairs.

“How did you do?” asked Tellor, following her up. “My guys said half the town is up in arms cos the king is gone, but this Baron is back, and that has messed up their revolution.”

“I got pretty much the same,” said Kaffor, walking into their small room. “But they think he has only just got back.”

“We need to take him out,” said Silvi.

“Really?” Tellor looked at her suspiciously. “What did your young people say?”

“Not so much what they said as what I felt. They are angry alright, and they are cursing everyone and everything, but underneath they are so scared they are frozen rigid. They should be running for it, but they are not even doing that.”

“How do we take him out? We haven’t got much of an army left, Silvi.”

“I’m not talking about that. I am talking about us. You two and me. Now.”

“What?” Tellor looked horrified. “Tell me you’re joking.”

“No, I’m not. If those kids are right, he is holed up in a warehouse in the market square. We go and grab him tonight, get him out and take him to Edver. He can put him on trial or something for attacking our friends.”

“We can’t do this, Silvi,” said Kaffor.

“Yes, we can. I chose you two because you are both excellent fighters; you especially Tellor know far more than you’ve admitted. And I am good too. This Baron thinks the town is full of

simple market people and traders, and he can get his thugs to scare people. The palace is a ruin, apparently, and the king is gone. The people I was talking to think the only place he can be is in this warehouse. If nothing else, it has to be worth looking at.”

Tellor looked at the girl closely. “What has got you so keen? I mean, I know you are hurting about your friends, they were our friends too, but this is a hell of a risk.”

“I know it is, Tellor, but I saw how scared they are. For the moment, this Baron is weak. He has lost most of his men up in Hertenesse, and the rest have run for it. He has his few men here, whoever they are, but he is building up again. Right now is our best opportunity.”

“You know there will probably be fighting between factions here, even if he’s gone,” said Tellor.

“But it will be their own people and not someone from outside. They will have the chance of getting someone half decent running their country. Not someone who lets his friends come in and loot and rape them!”

Tellor looked at Silvi and saw the raw nerve that had been exposed. “Alright. We go and check. If we can get in there, we will. If we cannot, we leave, find the dragons, and report to Sir Hal. Deal?” Silvi looked at him. “Deal?”

“Yeah, alright. We wait for a couple of hours first. Go in the early hours. There’s a moon up tonight.”

Silvi’s heart was beating hard like she had been for one of her mad mountain runs. Despite the tension, the town was quiet and asleep for the most part. They had waited a good hour past midnight before climbing out of the window at the back of the inn and slipping down a roof to a back alley. Then they had made their way to the square. They had seen patrols of men dressed like mercenaries who they had guessed worked for the Baron, but only a couple. He wasn’t back in full control of the town yet, and she doubted he had the manpower.

“I will send a messenger out in the morning, Baron.”

Silvi had found a loose board at the back of the warehouse and had risked squeezing through. Inside were piles of wooden boxes, some swords, and even stored food. As she crept around, she saw several men sleeping on rough pallets in darkened corners, but she was attracted to the flicker of an oil lamp. Someone was up very late.

“It is going to be two, three weeks before they get back,” a richly accented older man replied.

“Nothing I can do, Baron. But today’s little riot was smaller; they are beginning to lose heart.”

“Destroying that palace was no help.”

“I am not sure the rioters did; I think the King did on his way out. You know what he was like with all his little habits. Destroy the evidence.”

“No loss. He served his purpose.”

“Will your brother come?”

“We are close; he will come. He has all his Plain’s Horsemen. They like collecting heads of rioters. I will show you on the map in the morning, and you can send your messenger. I will write him a letter too; he will want details.”

“I must check on the guards. We have so few that they are pulling double shifts, and I need them for the daylight hours.”

“At least you and your men actually understand loyalty.”

Silvi heard footsteps retreating and then the sound of the Baron burping and coughing. After a few seconds, his light went out, leaving her in nearly complete darkness.

"Shit," she said to herself. Slowly and very carefully she retraced her steps to where she could see the faintest glimmer of moonlight shining through the slatted wall. Making her way along the crates, she put her hand on a small barrel and felt wetness. Silvi sniffed her hand. Oil. She could hardly see what she was doing, but she groped around the barrel until she found the stopper. She pulled, but it was stuck fast. This was an opportunity she could not miss. Trying to be as quiet as possible, she pulled a knife and levered the stopper out from the barrel. "Ow!" She bit her lip to stifle her cry as she stabbed her finger. She twisted the knife a bit more and eased the stopper out. Taking a deep breath, she tipped the barrel over, the oil glugging out onto the wooden floor. Now all she needed to do was light it.

"What are you doing?" Light flashed around the corner of the crate, and two big men jumped out holding a lamp.

"It's a girl!"

"Hey, watch your lamp! That's oil," said the other.

"Boys, I love you!" said Silvi, to their complete surprise. She rammed her knife into one, grabbed the lamp from the other and smashed it into the oil. "Bye!" she said with a smile and ran towards the back wall, the second man chasing after her shouting.

"Fire!" shouted someone else as the oil erupted into flames, spreading across the floor and back into the barrel.

"Look out!" shouted another, and the barrel erupted, sending the guard chasing Silvi sprawling on the ground, grabbing at her feet.

"Oh no you don't, you bastard," she swore at him, and smashed her heel down onto the back of his hand then kicked him in the face. "Can't stop, sorry." Silvi ran the last few paces then threw herself onto the floor and slid and wriggled through the hole.

"It's a big warehouse," whispered Kaffor. "Well guarded too."

"How many has he got inside, do you reckon?" asked Tellor. "What was that sound?"

"No idea. Where is she?" Kaffor and Tellor were waiting in an alley across the square from the warehouse to see what guards were where while Silvi slipped around the back. "She's been ages."

"We give her a few more minutes, then look for her," said Tellor.

"What is going on over there?" Kaffor asked. "Somebody has woken up; the doors are opening. Look, there's light in there."

"A lot of light," Tellor commented. "Why have they lit so many lamps?"

The two men looked at each other. "Silvi?" they both said.

"Shut up, you idiots!" snapped Silvi, skidding in next to them.

"Hey, you reek of oil!" said Kaffor.

"Sorry, I had to do it in the dark."

"Do what?" asked Tellor.

"That!" The three peeked out from the alley as men emerged running from the warehouse.

"What have you done?" asked Kaffor. Then smoke began to billow out from the doors.

"Oh, bloody hell. You set it on fire."

"Shut up and listen," growled Silvi. "The Baron is in there, well not for long. I don't know what he looks like, but he has a really thick accent, and he was talking about his brother coming with Plains Horsemen or something."

“Keffra-See,” said Tellor. “He must be one of the plains people. Vicious lot based in An-Hellern.”

“Be-Elin has spoken about them. They were at war with them for years. Who was the bloke she said? Erm. Tol-nee, I think. Something like that. Anyway, this Baron said he is going to send for his brother in the morning, so we have to grab him.”

“Won’t his men just send for him?”

“They don’t know where he is. He said he will show them on the map and write a letter.”

Men were running around the square getting buckets of water from the fountain and trying to douse the fire.

“They are definitely losing,” commented Tellor. “Come on, let’s help them.”

“Help them?” asked Silvi.

“Unless you know of another way to get out there and find your Baron.”

“Good point.”

The three ran out from the alley, and Tellor grabbed a bucket and filled it up at the fountain. “Find more buckets,” he shouted at the other two in a loud voice.

“Okay!” they replied, and ran around the square looking busy.

“How did this start?” shouted out a man with a thick eastern accent. “Captain!”

“I have no idea, sir,” answered the other voice from earlier. “You better get back, there are more barrels of oil in there.”

Silvi looked over from the fountain and saw a tall, thin man with a dark complexion and a short, severe beard, standing with his hands on his hips looking up at the smoking warehouse.

“You really need to get back, Baron,” called over the captain again, ordering his men to grab more water.

“Come on Baron, sir, over here. I’ve seen barrels blow before!” Silvi pulled at the man’s arm.

“Who are you?”

“Just passing, Baron, but trust me, if those go, you don’t want to be standing here.” The man looked angry. “Please, Baron, now!” Silvi pleaded with him.

“Alright!” Silvi ran with the Baron to the far side of the square just as the barrels inside caught and blew a hole clean through the roof of the warehouse.

The Baron swore something in a language Silvi didn’t recognise and men all over the square ducked involuntarily. Some had not been far enough away, and they screamed when the hot smoke and flames wrapped around them.

“Damn!” swore the Baron.

“Sorry about this, Baron,” said Silvi as Tellor and Kaffor ran over to her.

“What?”

“This.” She took her knife and cracked him over the back of the head, and he slumped to the floor. “Well, don’t just stand there!”

“Gods, he is heavy!” complained Kaffor.

“Where are the livery stables?” asked Tellor.

“Just around the corner.” Silvi left her two comrades dragging the unconscious Baron and quietly jumped over the fence of the livery. The fire from the warehouse was lighting the sky and even from here she could hear the shouts. They were looking for the Baron.

“Can you ride bareback?” she hissed.

“I can,” said Kaffor.

"I can't," replied Tellor. "And neither can this bloke unconscious."

"Bugger, forgot about that!" cursed Silvi. "Hang on."

"Come on, Silvi," said Kaffor. "I can hear voices."

"I'm going as fast as I can, alright?" She pushed the gate open. "One big one, mostly saddled. Tellor, tie the Baron on that one. You will have to ride behind me. I could only find three in the dark."

"Try anything once," said the archer with a laugh. Tellor and Kaffor tied the baron face down over the saddle as Silvi appeared with two more big horses.

"Those are carthorses," said Kaffor.

"All they have in here. We can come back in the daylight if you like."

"Alright! Damn but this is tall." The rider leapt up on the fence and jumped onto the back of the big carthorse.

"Get out of here." Silvi handed him the lead of the Baron's horse. "We will follow."

"Okay." Kaffor kicked the carthorse in the ribs who then lumbered off at a measured pace. "Oh, you have to be kidding me!" Kaffor leant back and gave the horse a good smack on the rump and it galloped into the dark.

Silvi bounced up on top of the second horse. "Get up! Use the fence."

"It's very high."

"What, not from up here, surely!"

"Nah, only kidding." Tellor climbed up the fence and leapt on behind her, slapping his hand down on the horse's rump, and sending them chasing after Kaffor.

"Are we going in the right direction?" asked Kaffor an hour later.

"Yeah, of course we are," said Silvi. "More or less."

"We should have waited till closer to dawn," complained Tellor.

"Well, we have him now," snapped Silvi. "Is he still unconscious?"

"Hey, Baron!" Tellor leant over and poked the man. "Are you still out?"

"Who are you?" replied the Baron weakly, but impressively angrily.

"No, wide awake," reported Tellor.

"Pity," said Silvi. "So, Baron, who are you?"

"Who are you?"

"My name is Silvi, and I am really pissed off with you. These two will tell you what I do to men who piss me off." Her voice was hard and cold, and even Kaffor turned around to look at her.

"Baron Tol-nee, and you are dead, whoever you are."

"Not currently."

"If you think I am going to tell you any more, then that won't happen," said the man, his voice strengthening.

"No, don't need any more," said Silvi. "I know you were going to send for your brother, but only you know where he is currently, and I know you are from the Eastern Plains, probably An-Hellern. And I know that your people have been the scourge of the Eastern Plains for centuries. To be honest, that is all I need to know. And it's all these beautiful creatures I can see waiting for us need to know too. Oh, by the way, they are Draig yr Anialr from Ponack, and I believe they have a particular dislike for your family."

“Impossible! The dragons died out five hundred years ago from a disease. They are extinct!” shouted the Baron, face down from the horse. “Despite the pitiful stories from our deserters.”

“I think I object to being called extinct, Tol-nee,” said a big voice from the dark.

“What? Who are you?”

“Be-Elin. Yes, that Be-Elin. And you owe me for what your ancestor did to my friends.”

“Baron!” shouted a man in the distance.

“Damn it!” cried out Silvi, an arrow whizzing past her ear. “Where did they come from? Tellor, go grab your bow. Tellor! Oh, sod it, he’s been hit!”

“In my side!” groaned the archer, collapsing

“I’ve got him,” shouted Mab-Pellin, and lifted the fainting archer off the horse. “Kaffor, help me tie him on.”

“Silvi, your bow.” Be-Elin handed over the longbow and quiver as the horsemen thundered into view. Silvi nocked two arrows and took two men out in one go, and Be-Elin leapt into the air and flew straight at the men, knocking four more from their horses.

“There are more coming!” she shouted back. “We have to get out of here.”

Silvi shot one more arrow then smashed her bow into the mouth of the next horse making it rear backwards.

“We must take the Baron!” shouted Silvi.

Kaffor jumped down from Mab-Pellin and the dragon threw a spear into an approaching rider. Kaffor cut the ropes, dumping the baron on the ground. Silvi pulled her long knife and sliced at the leg of the next rider to appear, then shoved her blade up into his groin.

“We have to go now!” shouted Be-Elin. “Kaffor, get onto Mab-Pellin!”

“We can’t leave the Baron because he will tell them where his brother is,” shouted Silvi.

“Brother?”

“He has a thousand plain’s horsemen.”

“Oh, that sort of brother,” said Be-Elin, ducking as an arrow flew over her head. “Silvi, get on!”

“But the Baron!” Silvi shouted.

Be-Elin stepped forward and trod on the baron with a sickening crunch.

“Problem solved. Now get on, girl!”

“Bloody ...”

The two dragons jumped into the moonlight as the rest of the horsemen skidded into view.

“Dragons!” said the captain, getting off his horse and running to the Baron. “Are you alright Baron? Ergh! Oh, that is not nice.”

“What is it?” shouted another.

“He’s dead. Very dead. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“Back to the town?”

“Forget it. Without him, we are dead meat.”

“Where to?”

“West. Hendesse or somewhere.”

“Why there?”

“They always need guards at the mines.”

“Cook!” shouted Silvi as the two dragons landed in the inner ward of Levin Burh.

“What is it?”

"Tellor. He has lost loads of blood!"

"Take him to the small hall," ordered the cook. Apart from being the cook, Cherry was also better at wounds than anyone else, and she ran in after them with rags and herbs. "Strip off his shirt," she ordered, checking his pulse. "Good. He is weak but alright. Oh, that is nasty. Jen, come and help me!"

"You should be at my end of it," muttered Tellor.

"Shut up, son," ordered the older cook and started to clean the wound. "You'll be alright."

"So, who are this family?" Edver Kellin asked Be-Elin in the orchard of the small, slightly run-down Kellin Burh near the capital Riena. Silvi and Be-Elin had never been to the lake, the town, or the burh before now, and had not met the king's wife or his two young children.

"They have ruled parts of the southern region of the Eastern Plains for centuries. They are a clan society that has a love for raiding," explained the dragon. "Or they were. I haven't been to look at the town of An-Hellern since I've been back. Tol-nee was a big family with various brothers running companies of horsemen. None called themselves Baron back then."

"And they don't like dragons?"

"They had a village of Draig Morglas near the town and were friendly with them. No, their problem was with the Draig yr Anialr from Ponack because we would stop their raiding, especially of the nomadic tribes that lived in the north above the River Al-ne-Kelaine. Towards the end, after a last bitter fight, we agreed to a truce. Tol-nee was ill and had nearly killed Eofin, our Dragon Leader, and there had been a drought and food was short. But after the disease struck and we abandoned Ponack, Tol-nee's family rose up and drove the nomads out."

"That was what Tooker in Meressa was talking about," said Silvi.

"Are they a threat?" asked the king.

"We don't know," said Silvi. "Obviously, the Baron isn't, but we know nothing about his brother. As we flew off, Mab-Pellin saw his men riding west and not back to the town, so I think that's the last we will hear of them. That means there is no one to send messages back, not that they know who this brother is anyway."

"All you can do is keep an eye out to the east," said Be-Elin.

"Me?"

"Yes. You and the dragons. Silvi and I are leaving."

"Sorry, Edver," said Silvi when the king looked at them open-mouthed.

"Edver Kellin, your world will change very rapidly now, I believe," said the dragon. "The threat from Calon has been removed, and Hal tells us that people have turned up from Tulinor wishing to form alliances."

"They have overthrown their king and want help," explained Edver.

"Then you must help them," said Silvi. "We have spoken about the system of government and law that Pree was trying to start in Preland. It sounds like a good system to me, if given a chance. The people of Calon will also need your help, and be persuaded to change the way their country is governed. I believe they will listen, especially the young people."

"Can't you help with that?" asked Edver. "Silvi, you have met some already."

"Silvi and I have other things that we need to do, Edver," said the dragon. "But it is to do with what you are starting here. We are going to need you, and we will return to call on you. When we do--"

"You will want me to abdicate."

"Yes, we will. First, you must bring change to Tulinor, Calon, and your own country, and talk to other neighbours. Please find out what is in Fienland because some of the riders from my days settled there, we think."

"Where are you going?"

"She hasn't even told me yet!" grumbled Silvi.

"That is complicated," said Be-Elin. "But it's very important."

"When will you be leaving?" asked Edver.

"Now."

"Edver, I am sorry," said Silvi. "I didn't know anything about this till earlier when fatty here told me."

The king smiled. "I personally think your friend is beautiful, Silvi, and I am going to miss her and you very much." He looked at the young woman caringly. "And not just because you look so like Geniva, but because you have helped to give us hope and save us from defeat."

"Edver, you will see us again," Be-Elin assured him. "Soon, probably, and not just for a visit. Silvi, we must go. We have a long journey."

Silvi shook the king's hand, climbed up on Be-Elin's back and looked up at the blue sky as the dragon leapt into the air. There were a thousand things she knew should ask the dragon, but for some reason, she didn't want to ask any of them.

Ferret had thought she had learned a lot about dragons in the last year, but she had to admit that Be-Sula and Lena looked beautiful beyond imagination. The dragon, who had lived in a village on Angyn with Draig Morglas and Draig Awyr, had produced from her bag the most elegant and enthralling silks and cloths which she had used to decorate her crown. She had even given Lena silks to wear over her leathers. Be-Sula, who was just thirty-seven, was a little bigger but slightly thinner than some of the other dragons, and as she flew, the sun glistened on her wings.

And then there was Mab-Tenn. Be-Sula and Lena had both insisted that if they wanted to impress then Mab-Tenn and his rider Daulin had to be in the party. There was no question about it, in the right light, the young dragon could bring even an army to a halt. He had a longer neck than usual and a white-cream complexion that could be blinding in bright sunlight. The tall, handsome Daulin was the perfect match.

"It's enough to make me sick," grumbled the five-hundred-and seventy-year-old Mab-Abin as they flew high in the sky above the River Wead.

"Couple of old birds together, eh?" said the Ancient chuckling, stroking his neck. "You are bigger than them, darling one. That will make its own impression."

"I wish old Bren-Hemon was still alive for visits like this," said Mab-Abin, his voice warm with memory. "He was so ridiculously big, but had such a soft, gentle humour, mostly."

"Mostly?"

"Tekkinmod's men killed one of his closest friends before I was over here. Apparently, the old red showed a side no one knew existed. Think me in a bad mood but four times the size."

"Oh. Can we talk about something else?"

"Do you think this is going to work?"

"Good question, Abin. I wish Terran was here because as a knight he is more recognisable, but I don't think he likes the diplomatic side very much. If when we land they all go shouting and screaming into the river, then we have problems. My hope is that by those two landing first, with the sun behind them, we will get away with it."

“Yes, Lena does have a sense of the dramatic,” commented Mab-Abin. “I have never seen her dressed like that. Daulin nearly walked into Mab-Tenn’s leg when she came out from the burh.”

“And what about me?”

“You already have both Terran and Hornan lusting after you, any more might be seen as greedy!”

“Dragon!”

“Well, for a crotchety old woman, dear, you are very beautiful you know.” The dragon paused. “You really do look like your mother. She was a most beautiful woman, inside and out.”

“I wish I remembered her more.”

“I am sorry, dear friend, because she should have been part of all this.”

“I know. My father should have been too. I never knew him so I don’t miss him like I miss my mother, but this last year, I have wished him here so many times.”

“He has been here, girl,” the dragon admonished her. “I see him daily when I look at you.”

“Thank you, old bird! Now, is that depressingly glittery thing the Prelates Palace?”

“It is. I spent far too much time here with Pree. Ready?” he called over to the young dragons who were flanking him.

The palace was not the busy place it had been in the time of Holin and Pree, but it was a warm day and people were in the grounds when three great shadows flickered and swooped over the roofs. In a second, all eyes turned to the sky. The dragons banked around and then two breathtakingly beautiful Draig yr Anialr landed softly, stood up high, and reached out their wings, the sun reflecting through their skin and off their silks. Mab-Abin, the largest of the three, settled between them and the dragons strode forward, their riders standing high on their backs.

“My name is Mab-Abin,” said the dragon in a loud but calm voice. “I wish to speak to the council.” No one moved. “I would like to speak to them today?”

“My name is Holinson. I am the deputy mayor,” said a small, round man, walking forward. “I guess you must be from Kend. I am afraid our mayor is not here.”

“I believe he is on his way,” said Mab-Abin. “But horses are rather slow.”

“I can imagine,” said the deputy mayor. “You wish to speak to the council?”

“Are they here?”

“Yes, though I would need to call them.”

“I think it better we speak to all of you. Shall we meet in the back garden by the terrace?” asked Mab-Abin.

“You sound like you know this old place.”

“Oh, I do.”

“Then yes, we will meet there.”

Mab-Abin bowed politely then leapt into the air, leaving the other two dragons and riders to embark on a charm offensive with the small group that had gathered.

“I sometimes wonder at you with your ability to suddenly sound so dramatic, old bird.”

“Is this name going to stick?”

“I’m working on it.”

“You are still angry with me for not warning you about forcing Hornan to swear, aren’t you?”

"I think I'm more upset about the wager."

"Just because we do not lie to intentionally deceive does not mean we do not play."

"But betting on that, of all things!"

"You oldies are no fun!"

"You might be bigger than me, but you know there is a way to knock a dragon out," threatened Ferret.

"You can't! Mab-Tok and Lilygwyn could, but I don't think Eafa could." The dragon was shocked. "Could he?"

"Are you sure? He was able to find the disease when they couldn't, you know."

"Don't even think about it, dragon girl!"

"Alright, dragon boy." Ferret chuckled, climbed down, and stood next to her friend.

"This is the council," announced Holinson, leading a group of nine middle-aged men down the steps from the terrace. "Well, two missing, but they are not here at the moment."

"No women?" asked Ferret.

"No. Should there be?"

"Yes. My name is Eiferra, and I am an adviser to Hornan Liander."

"I am honoured to meet you. Now, why did you wish to see us? Our mayor has been visiting your king asking for a small alliance."

"He has," said Mab-Abin. "Your name is puzzling me. Holinson. Does that mean Son of Holin?"

"Yes, it does. Though we have been Holinson for more generations than I know about. Always in Siinland, I believe."

"You asked me if I had been here before, Deputy Mayor," said Mab-Abin with a smile. "That office up there on the first floor, that used to be the Mayor's office many years ago."

"It still is," replied Holinson.

"And next to it was another office that was kept locked much of the time."

"We call it the map room. It has no maps in it so I have no idea of the origin of the name."

"It was called that because it was used by Pree and General Farthing during the long war and was where most of the maps were kept and made up."

"I did not realise it had such history."

"The history of this place is more important than that, Deputy Mayor."

"You have come here to give us a history lesson?" asked one of the other council members.

"Sometimes history lessons are useful for stopping terrible mistakes from happening, sir," said Ferret.

"Please continue," interrupted Holinson, intrigued by the conversation.

"During the war, Siinland was run by Mayor Holin and his council," explained Mab-Abin. "He may have been your ancestor, Holinson, I do not know. Holin was a fierce proponent of Pree's Law of Governance, the system by which those countries in the southern states were run after they threw off the shackles of the Prelates." Ferret looked up at her big friend and smiled. She was enjoying his eloquence even if she did prefer the silly dragon who took her swimming. "The system was relatively simple, and I believe you have adopted some of it here."

"Some?" asked another council member. "We are great believers in a mayoral system."

"With Pree's Law of Governance, mayors would only hold office for five years," explained Mab-Abin. "After that time, they would step down as mayor and from the council. They were not allowed to stand again, not allowed to name a successor, and no member of their family was permitted to stand for mayor."

“And they all did this?” asked Holinon with a bemused smile.

“I cannot say that they all did, but certainly that is what happened here. The trust between Holin and Pree was not only very personal but was essential. While Pree and Farthing were fighting the enemies of the South, Mayor Holin spent his time working with the other mayors. He made sure of their support, helped them to get their own countries running smoothly, and kept the entire alliance stable and purposeful. Pree herself had no territory, aside from some land she owned in Redust, she ran no country, and had she not died, she would have left these shores after the war. In fact, after she died, some of the mayors tried to persuade General Farthing to take some overall ruling position, but he refused.”

“How do you know all this?” asked a tall man.

“Because my name is Mab-Abin and Pree was my rider. Sir, I was here.”

“You are over five hundred years old?” asked Holinon. He folded his arms and put his head on one side, smiling.

“Yes, I am. Dragons can live for around nine hundred or a thousand years. It is normal for us, not magical.”

“This is fascinating, I have to admit,” said Holinon with a broad smile. “But I am puzzled why you came here to tell us this.”

“Because you are about to be undermined,” said Ferret to the council.

“How?”

“Your mayor has asked for King Hornan Liander’s help with the trouble you are having with some of your neighbouring countries,” explained Ferret. “The dragons are our friends and allies; they are not under the command of Kend. Mab-Abin here believes that Pree’s Law of Governance is the way forward if Preland is to be fit for both humans and dragons to live in. At the moment, much of it, as I am sure you know, is not. High Sen was a case in point.”

“We have heard of the trouble there,” said a councillor.

“Hornan agrees wholeheartedly with Mab-Abin, and has sworn an oath to help countries who wish to adopt such a system including Kend. He will be the last king of Kend.”

“He will abdicate?” Holinon sounded genuinely shocked.

“When the time is right,” said Mab-Abin. “I would not ask him to do it on a whim.”

“So how does that affect us?” asked a councillor.

“I think I can guess,” muttered Holinon. “He wants us to move to Pree’s Law of governance entirely before he helps.”

“Yes, he does,” said Mab-Abin. “And your mayor has refused, stating that his right to the post for life and to pass it onto his heirs is sacrosanct.”

Ferret watched the council members carefully as they thought through the implications of their mayor’s actions.

“Pree put it like this,” said Mab-Abin. “When she deposed her own father, she refused to take his place. The people of Redust liked Pree, and they used to call her their friend and chant her name. They liked that she would sit and talk to the people of the village where she lived, and she would hug Farthing, her love, when they walked along the street. They were surprised when she said she would not rule them. She asked them if she inherited their Prelatehood and ran it for the benefit of all and then passed it to her child, what would happen if her child was cruel or lazy or greedy? Or maybe her child was wonderful, but what of their child? No. She insisted that any system where the choice of who leads is removed is a system doomed to corruption and abuse. Your mayor has proved the wisdom of her words today. He would rather put his own greed and position above your needs.”

Ferret almost burst out laughing. Every member of the council of men looked like they had honey stuck in their beards as they muddled their way through the plain reality of what Mab-Abin had told them.

"Then what would you have us do, Mab-Abin?" asked Holinson with amusement.

"I would not have you do anything if you did not want to do it, Deputy Mayor," answered the dragon. "But if you find yourself in the position to implement Pree's Law of Governance fully for some reason, then I'm sure Hornan Liander will welcome any conversation with you and will look at ways you can work together. Perhaps, between all of you, other countries will also be persuaded to change the way they are run."

"If you should take such a route," added Ferret with a smile, finding herself imitating Mab-Abin's formal tone, "then may I suggest finding some women to also serve equally to the men on the council? Half your population is female, and it seems odd that you show no apparent wish to have them support you."

"I am sure they support us anyway," objected one of the male council members.

"Trust me, sir; they don't."

"What say you to that, Mab-Abin?" one of the other council members asked.

"In my society, there are no differences between male and female dragons and neither are there any between male and female riders. I can say no more than that because there is no more to say. Now, I suggest we leave, Eiferra. They may have a lot to talk about before their mayor arrives back at his personal palace."

Ferret climbed up on the dragon's back as the council took a pace backwards. "Choose carefully, council," she said. "Some choices may have implications down through many years. My friend here will live to see the echoes of your choices though centuries."

Mab-Abin launched himself into the air, calling to the other dragons and riders to join him from where a fascinated little crowd surrounded them.

"Well, if nothing else, the young ones have certainly wooed some of the people of Siinland," commented Ferret. "Do you think they will depose their mayor?"

"Perhaps," said Mab-Abin. "Though I am not sure about Holinson becoming mayor in his place. He has a trait that his ancestor would not appreciate."

"What is that?"

"Holin might have been an excellent negotiator and mayor, but he always remained the farmer. He said his fields stopped him from becoming pompous."

"I was waiting for this to happen," said Ferret, sitting on a log outside her small cottage.

"We have to go today."

"Why today?"

"Because we have to." Mab-Abin gave her a flat look.

"Alright, I won't ask, but some warning would have been nice. I have to tell Hornan, Terran and Anna. Oh dear, Anna. How long are we going to be gone? Days? Weeks?"

"I don't know. I really don't know."

"That sounds like months then. How am I going to tell them?"

"How are you going to tell us what?" called out Hornan.

"What are you all doing here?" asked Ferret in surprise as the King, Terran, and Anna rode up the trail, Anna on Ferret's horse.

"I sent for them," said Mab-Abin. "I thought this would be better here."

"So, what have you got to tell us?" asked Terran.

“Mab-Abin has just told me we have to leave again.”

“You have been coming and going ever since you first got here, Ferret,” said Terran with a shrug. “Normally I find out later.”

“This is different,” said Mab-Abin. “Please do not ask me where we are going, because I do not know it all. Dragons are not good at lying so if you don’t want us to tell someone something, don’t tell us in the first place. It works,” he said with a sigh. “But with the new council in High Sen, a new mayor possibly in Siinland, and opportunities in Rissen and other countries, things are starting to change. There is a very long journey yet to travel, and there are other problems we must work on. But we will return, and Hornan, we will see a lot of you, I suspect.”

“What about the other dragons?” asked the king.

“They will stay here, and they will continue to work for you. Eventually, more dragons will return too. I think I can safely say that you are going to be stuck with dragons one way or another.”

“And what about me?” asked Anna. Ferret looked at Mab-Abin with a little annoyance and pulled the girl close.

“You I will think about every day, Anna. You and my horse, who, I think, might be seeing a lot of each other. And you will need to look after this place for me; just check on it.”

“You can check on my house too,” said the dragon. “I would like that.” The girl pulled away from Ferret and hugged the dragon then ran back and hugged the Ancient again. Ferret pushed the girl back to arm’s length and kissed her on the head.

“Go on. I need to pack, or at least check what he has packed.” She looked at the two men. She didn’t know what she felt about either of them really. It had become very complicated, but she was not going to complicate it more now. “I am not going to say goodbye to you two because you don’t need me to. I will come back here, even if I have to walk.”

As the three mounted up and rode out of the clearing, Anna looking small on the Ancient’s troublesome horse, Ferret leant back against Mab-Abin. “Well, where are we going, dragon boy? Home? The Beach? Angyn?”

“The Isle of Taken.”

“Taken?”

Chapter 20 - Taken

When it was built many, many thousands of years before, The Catre Sarad and the Neuath on Taken had been a busy place. The people who met there always had something to say to someone day or night, winter or summer, whatever the weather. Different peoples had graced the flagstones and corridors at various times during those years, and its purpose had varied enormously, but chattering had continued uninterrupted almost to the day the very last dragon had left; a large female sea dragon with a distinctive white chest.

In the five hundred years since, it had fallen quietly to ruin. The buildings were mostly in good order, built out of vast blocks of stone mined from the mountain itself, but nature always claims its own, and first weeds, then shrubs, and then trees had pushed the paving stones apart and broken roofs and windows. For the last ten years, a score and more of families had returned to the deserted fishing town below and to the villages and fields. They were employed to clear away the worst of nature's intrusions, and to bring some sort of order back to the ancient halls cut into the mountain.

For Silvi, landing in the dark of night under a starry sky, this meant nothing, and when she climbed down from Be-Elin, she pulled her jacket around her.

"It's cold here."

"We're a couple of thousand feet up and it's an island. It gets a bit windy."

"Have you been here before?" asked Silvi.

Be-Elin had asked Silvi not to pester her with lots of questions as it was not for the dragon to answer. It had been difficult since they had spent several days travelling, especially over the Yonder Sea, the dragon delaying as if she was determined to arrive at a set time.

"I lived here for a while. Like I said before, the desert dragons had nothing to do with the dragon politics here, so the first time I visited was with Farthing. But I stayed in a calliston's house down by the sea and didn't come up here particularly. I wonder if the house is still there?"

"It's a long time!" said Silvi.

"I forget when I see buildings that have lasted, like some of the old castles, that most will have disappeared or been replaced. Especially the smaller ones. Some of them, anyway."

"It feels desolate. I know it's night, but even so."

"It has been silent for hundreds of years, Silvi."

"Sad. That's why I'm cold, I think. This place is sad. Are we just going to stand here?"

"Sorry, but yes."

"Alright." The girl looked around a little impatiently. "Can we go and look at the sea from the wall over there?"

"Come on, we can do that."

They walked over to the edge of the vast Cartre Sarad. Silvi jumped up on the wide wall and sat down, cross-legged. It was a still night, and with just the one moon low in the sky, there was

enough light to make out the calm ocean, spread out for countless leagues, glistening gently in the starlight.

"In the day, if it's sunny, I will take you to the top of the mountain," said the dragon. "They used to ban dragons from touching the mountain because it was sacred, but the Draig yr Anialr didn't believe in all that rubbish, and I sneaked up there a couple of times. Of course, there is no one to stop me now; the last caretaker died so long ago."

"Who were they?"

"The caretakers were just dragons who would make sure everything ran smoothly. No one lived here, not officially anyway, apart from the humans down in the villages and the town, but the caretakers did some of the time. The last one was an ice dragon called Bren-Diath."

"You have spoken about him before."

"In the war, it was hard to get dragons other than us desert dragons to help. Everything had become so divided. The only way Weasel could persuade them was to make Bren-Diath the official leader of the dragon host. Of course, it was Be-Inua who was really in charge, but she still deferred to him. After she died, Farthing ordered the dragons to leave by reading out a command from Bren-Diath: You have done honour to all; go home."

Silvi saw that Be-Elin had gone very still, and she hopped down from the wall and leant against her. She always now knew when the dragon was crying, in the way dragons do.

Suddenly the dragon stiffened and sniffed the air. "Ah good," she said, her voice regaining its normal cheerfulness. "My brother is here!"

"Your brother?"

The large shadow dropped down from the sky and bowed.

"And she is my sister!" said Mab-Abin, joy in his voice.

"And who are you?" asked a beautiful young woman, climbing down from Mab-Abin's back.

"Silvi. Silvi Farthing," replied the girl.

"Farthing?" asked Ferret in amazement.

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Ferret. Erm, Eiferra. Oh dear. Mab-Abin, you are in so much trouble!"

"Mab-Abin?" said Silvi. "Mab-Abin, as in Mab-Abin who Pree rode?"

"That's me!" said the dragon cheerfully.

"Be-Elin, explain!"

"Be-Elin?" spluttered Ferret. "Mab-Abin, your sister is Be-Elin? Why didn't you tell me, you bloody dragon?"

"And why didn't you tell me?" Silvi turned around and thumped Be-Elin on the chest. "You, you... You have almost lied!"

"Dragons don't lie," said Be-Elin.

"Sounds like you two have got bloody close!" growled Ferret.

As the two riders shouted at their dragons they were interrupted by laughter; human laughter. Young, female, human laughter.

"And it took so long to get them to the point where they could, at the very least, deceive a little."

"Who are you?" asked Ferret, peering into the darkness. Her night sight was no good for details like faces.

"Come with me, all of you, into the Neuath. I have lit fires in there." The young woman walked towards the huge stone buildings. "And please leave the questions for me; these poor flappies have suffered enough!"

"Flappies?" asked Silvi.

The two dragons walked happily after the woman, and Ferret and Silvi followed in their wake, too confused and angry to talk. When they entered the great entrance hall, the woman turned through the arches at the back and continued down a high, broad corridor, easily big enough for both the dragons and several more.

"It has taken years just to clean up this bit," she called back, her voice echoing off the high walls. "It's astonishing what five hundred years of dust and nesting seagulls will do to a place. Disgusting." She turned right into the vast central chamber, lit by several fires, and walked up to the large stone dais. As she walked into the light from the flames, they could see she was wearing riding leathers and walked with a lightness and gracefulness which spoke of many years as a rider.

"Now," she said, turning around with a twinkle in her brown eyes. "Who's first?"

Silvi stared and blinked, then frowned, and put her hand on her head. "This can't be right."

"What can't be, child?"

"Child? You are not much older than me! But, I don't understand. Auntie?"

"Well, I never actually said I was your auntie, Silvi. Probably the wrong word really."

The woman was enjoying herself which Ferret found annoying.

"You are playing around, girl. Please. I am too old for this."

"Well, I would argue about the too old bit," answered the woman.

"But if you were not my auntie, who were you?" asked Silvi.

"Am I; I haven't changed. Try grandmother, I suppose."

"Grandmother? Now you really are taking the piss!" snapped Silvi.

"Eiferra," said the woman, losing some of her humour. "How old are you?"

"Erm, just over five hundred and twenty years old."

"What?" gasped Silvi. "How can you be?"

"Well, Weasel managed it," pointed out the annoying woman.

"Yes, but he was a magician," said Silvi. "An Ancient, so Be-Elin tells me. And you are still in trouble, dragon girl!"

"And Eiferra here is his daughter."

"Oh," said Silvi. "So, you are?"

"An Ancient, yes," said Ferret, grumpily.

"You look so young!"

"I stopped ageing when I was twenty, Silvi. Well, the body did, anyway. The rest is feeling pretty damned old right now!"

"Good, so we have established that some people get to live a long time," said the woman.

"Now Silvi, use that brain of yours which has been so wonderful, and that keen eye of yours that could shoot arrows at the Calons, even if I still outshot you."

"That was you!" said Silvi, walking up to the woman. "At the battle on the River Lev. You fired those arrows. I have never seen shooting like that. I am not sure it is even possible."

"Takes a bit of practice."

"And you whispered to me."

The woman's expression softened, and she put her hand on Silvi's face. "I think I have been waiting a long time for you, Silvi, little girl. A long, long time."

Silvi covered the woman's hand with her own and looked into the soft brown eyes, so young and yet somehow ageless. She reached out with her other hand and stroked the woman's hair as the reality dawned on her and tears flowed down her face. She felt she could hardly breathe and her eyes were stinging.

"Mistry?"

"Yes, child," whispered the woman.

"Oh, the gods," cried Ferret. "How?" She looked at the two riders in front of her and up at the dragons who were standing rock still. "Oh, sodding hell!"

She rushed to the women and the three hugged and wept and stroked each other's faces as the years fell away, and the spirits of those loving companions reunited once more in the great hall. Farthing, Pree, Rusty, Weasel, and Mistry, watched over, as always, by the dragons who had loved them all.

"I don't understand," said Ferret to Mistry as they sat on the Dais, the dragons curled up together asleep by one of the fires.

"I think it happened in stages," explained Mistry. "Your father saved my life, like he had done for others, but it was worse for me which I did not know at the time. To heal me when I was so close to death, he had to share a little of himself with me, as you do when you heal. Then later, when we went to Angyn the first time, we did not know how to tell the Draig Dechrin to fly low enough to keep me alive. The only way Weasel was able to help was to share with me entirely. I don't think he realised what he had done, partly because of his mother."

"Sen-Liana? Why?"

"You have the book she gave your mother. Eiferra, there is so much in there that is wrong, it is almost worthless."

"I have come to realise that over the years. But that doesn't explain you."

Silvi was listening quietly, gazing at her great mother, one of her heroes, still unable to believe what she was seeing.

"When an Ancient mates with a mate; I hate that word." Mistry twisted her nose. "Look, when an ancient has sex with anyone, in the moment of passion, there is a bit of sharing going on beyond the normal." Silvi giggled involuntarily. "As Silvi can probably tell you in great detail!" The girl blushed. "I think it's probably rather fun and adds something," said Mistry with a smirk. "When that is with someone special, then the resulting child can, with a bit of luck, maybe a lot of luck, be an Ancient. And in the process, the other half, man or woman, ends up like me and lives for bloody years."

"So, you and Weasel..." said Silvi.

"No!" said Mistry, blushing herself. "But in keeping me alive, he shared himself like Eiferra does when she heals someone, but in an extreme way. The offshoot is that I am like one of Sen-Liana's mates, but without having a child. Or sex, Silvi! But there has been a complication." Mistry looked into the Ancient's eyes, and spoke quietly, almost guilty. "I do not understand why, but when Weasel helped me, he left some things behind, like many of his memories."

Ferret put her hand to her mouth. "What memories?"

"Most of them, up to the point he and I went to Angyn. Nothing beyond, obviously. I am sorry, I do not have memories of Weasel and Elena. They come in bits, prompted by things I see or do. Almost like a conversation. Actually, always like a conversation."

"So?" Ferret's voice was a whisper.

“They are just memories, Eiferra, but in some ways, he is still here. Between you and me, you with his talents and me with his memories, he is still here.”

“Thank you.”

The three were sitting in a triangle, and Silvi held their hands.

“Mistry, this is still all a puzzle, this sharing and giving birth to ancients,” said Ferret. “But what about the yearning? Sen-Liana has spent chapters describing this aching, debilitating need for an Ancient to produce another Ancient, though it doesn’t make any sense to me.”

“Complete bollocks, to be honest, Eiferra. She only had the stories of three ancients to go by, and all three were as old as the hills by the time they had children. It wasn’t some mystical yearning; Weasel’s father Dierren was going senile. Even ancients get old eventually, or their brains do.”

“Explains a lot,” muttered Mab-Abin from where he was curled up with his sister.

“Go back to sleep,” snapped Ferret. “I’m still angry with you.”

“Don’t blame them, please,” said Mistry. “They have been under such strict orders, and I have been checking on them all the time.”

“Why?” asked Silvi. “Why all this secrecy?”

“Fren-Eirol says I am too much like Weasel,” said Mistry.

“Fren-Eirol?” said Silvi, blinking.

“Oh, yes. The painting in Meressa,” said Mistry with a chuckle. “I told her about that. She wasn’t very impressed.”

“She is still alive?”

“She is terribly old, Silvi,” said Mistry. “But yes, she is very much alive and just as irritable. However, to my games, for which I apologise. I have had several problems. It is all very well for me to want to bring the dragons back and to try to sort out Bind and Preland, but I did not know if it was possible. Also, I did not know whether you two were going to be the right people. I am sorry, Eiferra, but when we discovered that Elena had died, which was a terrible shock to me, we didn’t know what that would mean for you. Silvi, I chose you on a bit of a whim, I’m afraid. I saw a little bit of me in you and when I realised where you were living, well, I had to chance it.”

“Where I live? In my cottage? Why?”

“Oh, dear one.” Mistry’s eyes were soft and sad. “That was Pree’s house, the place she and Farthing should have lived after the war, but she died. We found it when we moved to Hope, still with her things in it. Farthing and I loved each other deeply, but he loved Pree so much, and he never recovered from her death. When he died, I buried him at the house, just next to it. I gave him back to her.” Mistry was holding her hands together playing with her fingers. Ferret looked at the woman and saw how, like Mab-Abin, she had carried the pain of that time through the years. They had achieved so much, but at such terrible cost to each of them. Ferret pulled Mistry close and let the woman cry tears of pain while Silvi held her hands.

“So,” said Mistry a bit later. “There are many questions, and I cannot answer them all tonight. There are more important reasons why you two are here.” The woman stood up and went over to the sleeping dragons. “I wish I could give these two a year away from everything,” she said. “They have worked so hard. Not just with you two, but sneaking off at night and doing things for me too. For a while, they were the only dragons here you see. Have either of you heard about the Cwendrina?”

“Be-Elin mentioned about Pree being the Cwendrina,” said Silvi.

"There is a little about her in Sen-Liana's book," added Ferret.

"Well, Pree wasn't the Cwendrina," said Mistry. "Wake up you two. You need to hear this because you don't know this bit."

"We're awake," said Be-Elin. "With you sobbing and chattering in the background, fat chance we were going to get any sleep."

"Love you too, podgy!" said Mistry, twisting her mouth. "Now, Pree wasn't the Cwendrina; that was a ruse by Geezen to protect the real Cwendrina. At first, I thought it was terrible what she had done, that she lied to us all. But when I realised how important the Cwendrina was, I knew that Geezen had done the right thing."

"Who was the Cwendrina then?" asked Silvi.

"Rusty, Farthing's sister. Well, not actually his sister at all, but none of us knew that, including Rusty herself."

"So, what is her importance?"

"I have a lot of work for the two of you to do and lots for you to read, but this is the rough version. If we go back twelve thousand years or so, long before the Haftens or the Heinela Cwendrin, the Cwendrina was not a queen at all. She acted as a link between everyone to keep the balance between humans and dragons and all the various human and dragon factions; like a court everyone could refer to. There was a bond between her and the ancients which I haven't worked out yet, but is probably very important. Over the years, the original role of the Cwendrina was corrupted and changed, and eventually the line of the Cwendrina was hidden because it was being abused. The point is, the only time there has been complete peace and balance is when there were Ancients and Cwendrinas. If we are to bring back the dragons, then we also have to bring back the Cwendrina."

"Makes sense," said Silvi. "So, what is the problem?"

"Rusty had a red-headed child by her husband Sebbon," said Mistry. "Which was a bit of blind luck, as it happens, since Rusty's first love in life was not men. Be that as it may, she did marry, was very happy, and very wealthy. Then the company she and Sebbon owned vanishes, and that is where the line ends. On my own, I haven't been able to pick up the trail, so you four are going to have to find her."

"Don't you ride dragons now, then?" Silvi was a bit confused.

"Ah, well, yes, you haven't actually met my dragon yet. He is a touch on the big side."

Be-Elin burst out laughing. "Big? He likes to sit on the top of the mountain here, and I think it has shrunk by three feet!"

"Shut up, Elin!" said Mistry sarcastically. "Silvi, you think you get annoyed with her? She and her brother have been my neighbours in Angyn for the last few hundred years. And they wonder why I sent them here?" Mab-Abin chuckled in the background. "Anyway, he is sitting outside on the Sarad now, so you can see him before I go."

"Go?" said Silvi, feeling suddenly lost.

"I have other things to do, but I will be around, don't worry. Anyway, you will need to find the Cwendrina and bring her here."

"Why here?" asked Ferret.

"Because this is what the Neuath was. It was the place of the Ancients and the Cwendrina."

"How have you found all this out?" asked Silvi.

"I am coming to that. You will also need to go to the Abbey in the Black Hills. Eiferra, this is where the plan went astray. You have never heard of the Abbey, have you?"

"No, I haven't."

“Well, if your mother had lived, you would have done. It was where your grandmother lived for years. I have lived there off and on each time I came over, and I kept expecting you to show up, and you never did. I thought either that something had happened to you or, like Weasel, you had just turned your back on who you were. It never occurred to me that Elena had died. I am sorry, girl.”

“I hardly remember her now, Mistry. I was only seven.”

“I was not quite three, I think,” said Silvi. “I have better memories of my so-called aunt here. You told good stories.”

“My own daughter Se-Ini liked my stories too. So did the first Silvi.”

“What is at the Abbey?” asked Ferret.

“All my writings from my research. It’s important you know the history that I have uncovered. I have kept most of this from you two dragons as well. It’s too complicated to explain now, so you should go and read it all through, and perhaps you will have your own ideas. Then, you are on the trail of Rusty’s descendants.”

“How do we know there is a Cwendrina?” asked Ferret. “You said it nearly stopped with Rusty.”

“Well yes, but we have an advantage. My big friend outside can sense her, just like he can sense you, Eiferra. He has no idea where she is at all, other than he thinks she is in Preland. Sadly, geography doesn’t work for him in the same way as the rest of us. He and I are always getting lost!”

“Isn’t that dangerous on a dragon?” asked Silvi.

“On these little babies, yes,” said Mistry. “But Bell-Sendinar can fly around the whole of Dirt without having to land. I have to stop him flying too high or I will suffocate, but other than that, the most important thing is to make sure I take plenty of food.” Mistry chuckled to herself. “Talking about the man, I must leave and you must get on with your work. But first, I have a pleasant job for the four of you to do. I need you to go back to Eiferra’s villa and sort out a problem that is waiting there. No, I am not going to tell any of you what it is. No clever games this time; I just want it to be a nice surprise. Sort that out and take some time to get to know each other. You have a hell of a job to do, and it will get more difficult. Then, go to the Abbey in the Black Hills and read everything. I will see you there. After that? Well, we will see.” Mistry started to leave. “Well, come on, girls! Do you want to meet the biggest dragon on Dirt or not?”

When Be-Elin and Mab-Abin landed on the warm sands outside the Villa in Gornenshire, the surprise that had to be sorted out walked up to them.

“Fifty Draig Morglas, eighty Draig Mynyth Coh, ten Draig Awyr who fancied a trip, and there will be another eighty Draig yr Anialr here tomorrow,” said the big sea dragon with a laugh. “And of course, one very, very old sea dragon, who is terribly beautiful, rather large, and has a distinctive white chest.”

The two surprised desert dragons ran to Fren-Eirol and knocked her flat on her back.

“How did you manage it, Snowy?” said Be-Elin, holding her old friend tightly and wrapping her wings around her. “I never thought you could do this trip!”

“I think I swam half of it,” said Fren-Eirol. “It is the hardest thing I have done in my life, but I followed the Scimra, and they have never let me down.”

“We thought she was too old,” explained Mab-Abin. “It is a hell of a journey, and we didn’t think she would be able to fly here, and she was so desperate to come home.”

“So, where are you going to go?” asked Ferret, walking up to the Draig Morglas and taking her large hand.

“Here, of course, girl. Next to the love of my life where Elena buried him. Where else would I go?”

Ferret almost collapsed. “I never met him, Fren-Eirol,” she said. “I need him!”

“I know you do,” said the dragon. “So do I.” Fren-Eirol looked up at the small girl standing back a little way, feeling like an intruder. “And what about you, Silvi?” asked the dragon, sitting back up and shaking the sand from her wings. “I can see both Mistry and Farthing in you.”

The eighteen-year-old young woman who had been thrown out of her home, trained to near breaking as a rider, had been attacked, beaten, fought in battles, had suffered the loss of her friends, and had had to grow up so fast while being filled with stories of incredible people by Be-Elin, stood in front of the huge dragon with tears falling freely down her face, and she said the first thing that came into her head.

“Fren-Eirol, may I ride?”

I hope you enjoyed this first book in the second series of Dirt. If you did, leave a quick comment or review wherever you bought it from. Now, rush off and read book two, Dragons of Dirt and the continuing story of Silvi, Ferret, Be-Elin, Mab-Abin and, of course, Mistry.

Appendix

A Brief History of General Farthing and the Great Wars

By Tooker

How do I begin to tell such a complicated tale as the one about Johnson Farthing and Pree and the war they fought? I suppose, if I were to tell it in its briefest form it would run something like this:

Johnson Farthing of Redust woke to find his sister Rustina had been kidnapped. He chased across the world on a dragon and rescued her and Pree, the daughter of the ruler of Redust. Returning home, they built an army, overturned Pree's father, who turned out to be wicked, and then spent the next couple of years warring against Belin Tekkinmod and Duke Harnon as they tried to oppress the continent. They made friends with dragons who, though they are not a war-mongering people, helped them in the battles. Sadly, a disease struck and nearly wiped out the dragons, but some escaped to the far side of the world of Dirt and survived. Johnson won his war, but he lost his love as Pree was killed, and he went to live on a distant island for the rest of his life with a beautiful girl called Mistry.

You see, it is already getting complicated, and yet it missed so much that is important, so much that you might need to know before you begin the tale of the people of our own time these many centuries later. Who was Johnson Farthing? How could a man, a very young man, go from being a simple cart pusher to becoming one of the most respected generals in history? Why was Pree, this vibrant red-headed girl, so important? What was it that she created, this thing called Pree's Law, that could change the lives of so many for the better?

And then there are the dragons. Did they really exist? Were dragons so big that some could destroy a building? And is it true that they do not lie, do not understand borders and nations and, most importantly, have never had a war between themselves? These are difficult questions and I cannot begin to answer them all, but I will try to give you a sense of the story, a sense of those times, as related to me by people who know so much more than I.

Johnson Farthing lived an impoverished life in the old town of Wead-Wodder in the Prelatehood of Redust, five hundred long and dismal years ago. In those times, the continent we now called Preland was known as The Prelates and was made up of a couple of hundred small countries, Prelatehoods, each run sometimes tyrannically by a religious leader called a prelate. Redust was one such Prelatehood and was in the hands of a greedy individual called Prelate Gorestop Hearting. Odd name, though not out of place in that country, and a most dislikeable man, by all accounts.

Farthing shared a tiny room with his sister Rustina. She worked as a poorly paid general maid in the Prelate's Palace of Slypa Burh, built on a small island in the estuary of the great river Wead. Their life and their extreme poverty was unremarkable and shared by many of the town, and indeed most people across the continents of The Prelates and Bind. It should have been a miserable existence, but these were people of character and humour, and they laughed and played as they struggled.

Their lives were overturned when Rustina and Precious, the daughter of the Prelate, were taken by slavers and smuggled away across the Yonder Sea to the distant shores of the continent of Bind. Both Rustina Farthing and Precious Hearting had red hair, and this was seen as an omen of good fortune. A pair was a prize worth thieving! Prelate Hearting dismissed the incident as the act of a spoilt child and ordered his police to do nothing, and so it was left to Farthing to ask for help from friends. A midwife called Geezen Truk, who had brought Farthing and Rustina into the world, introduced him to a magician, a finder of people, and to a dragon.

Geezen spoke to Fren-Eirol, the beautiful sea dragon with a distinctive white chest, and revealed that Precious Hearting was, unknowingly, the Cwendrina, a distant descendant of an ancient queen of Dirt to whom the sea dragons had once sworn an oath of protection. Geezen persuaded Fren-Eirol to carry Farthing in pursuit of his sister. At that time, the relationship between humans and dragons had become distant and untrusting. Many humans had never seen a dragon, and both sea dragons and red mountain dragons refused to carry humans. But the need was great and dragons take oaths seriously, even those given thousands of years before.

Reluctantly, Fren-Eirol flew Farthing and Eafa, the finder of people more commonly known as Weasel, to an island in the middle of the Yonder Sea called Taken. Although abandoned in our own time, in those days, the island was the home to a small community of traders and farmers, all gathered around the tiny port of Taken Town. At the eastern end of the island stood, as it stands today, a tall, lonely mountain called Meindir Gydaynis, upon which was built the Neuath, the huge debating hall of the dragons.

If this tale is nothing else, it is a story of both bravery and mishap, for while stopping on their journey, Farthing was stung by a poisonous sea creature called an onga and was near death when they arrived at the island. Weasel enlisted the services of a small healer dragon, a Draig Bach-Iachawr named Mab-Tok, and with this fellow's mysterious talents, Farthing was saved. Mab-Tok asked to accompany them on their journey, and the four continued across the ocean to eventually arrive in Jerr-Vone, a barren, lifeless, desert country in northern Bind. Here, at a slave market, they discovered that Rustina and Precious had been bought by a man called Belin Tekkinmod, and had been taken to Wessen in the far north-east of the vast continent. As Weasel and Farthing left the market to meet with the two dragons, they were attacked. Weasel was left for dead, and Farthing was taken by slavers to be a breeding pair with a young girl called Mistry Jinx.

But there was much more to Weasel than just a simple finder. He was over a thousand years old and had many skills, most of which I admit that I do not understand, and so was able to save his own life. He and the dragons then rescued Farthing and Mistry, and resumed the chase after the young women across the north of Bind. In yet another terrible misadventure, Fren-Eirol was grievously wounded near a small village called Sarn-Tailin by a creature called a Wyrn, a vicious and mindless beast which thankfully no longer exists. At least, I hope it doesn't!

Weasel and Mab-Tok rushed to the Black Hills to a place known as The Abbey to fetch help. To Weasel's shock, here he met his mother, Sen-Liana, who he had assumed had died a thousand years before, and with whom, I should point out, he had had a difficult relationship when a boy.

She revealed to Weasel some more about himself, about who he really was, and that his father was the long-dead Great Magician called Dierren. Now, there really is a person of myth and many a tavern tale, most of which I am assured are quite untrue. But it appears the man himself was real enough.

With the help of a Draig Dechrun, an immense black dragon named Bell-Sendinar, they rescued Fren-Eirol and brought her to the Abbey to heal. But Precious and Rustina were still enslaved, and Johnson Farthing feared for their lives. Sen-Liana was friendly with the dragons and riders of Ponack in the Sand Hills, the only dragons on Dirt that still regularly took human riders. I really must stress, for it is important to our tale, that relations between humans and dragons and the giant land-based creatures called Callistons, sadly now extinct, were so bad, that many dragon communities had hidden away and had done so for hundreds and hundreds of years. No wonder most humans even then knew nothing of dragons, and it explains why now, in my time, most do not believe dragons ever existed. But in Ponack, the Draig yr Anialr and their riders lived and worked together to help keep the peace in the vast wilderness known as the Eastern Plains; a wild place still.

Riding on a desert dragon called Be-Elin, Farthing and his new friends rescued his sister and the Prelate's daughter and brought them to the Abbey. Farthing was severely wounded as was Be-Elin. Precious Hearting then revealed that Belin Tekkinmod was her father's cousin; they had not been kidnapped from the Prelate's Palace, her father had sold them. With the dragons gravely injured, Farthing and his friends, including Mab-Tok and a small white dragon called Lilygwin, travelled for two months back across Bind in a wagon driven by the young and clever Mistry Jinx. Tekkinmod, desperate for the return of his slaves, ambushed them in the Port of Tool on the Yonder Sea, but with the help of the now recovered Be-Elin and Fren-Eirol, they escaped and made their way to Taken by boat.

The story could have ended there, I suppose, and it is truly an adventure worthy of song, though I fear my cursory telling does it no justice, but these young people were exceptional. Precious Hearting, now known simply as Pree, wished not only to see the end of her father, but an end to the oppressive system of the Prelature that tolerated poverty such as endured by Farthing and Rustina. By this time, she had fallen in love with Farthing and he with her, and they decided to build a revolution together.

But their plans were scuppered by Belin Tekkinmod. Unknown to them, he had long been planning to rebuild the ancient empire of the Haftens, a vicious, bloody, imperialistic regime which had collapsed a thousand years before. He believed humans were the true inheritors of Dirt, and the draig were interlopers that should be destroyed or removed. That dragons had been involved with the rescue of his two red-headed prizes angered him greatly, and he decided to move forward with his plans. While Farthing and Pree were still on the Isle of Taken, he travelled to Redust to ally with his cousin, bringing in his own men to subdue the people of Wead-Wodder.

Farthing and Pree returned to Redust with the intention of overthrowing the prelate, but when Tekkinmod's plans became clear, they realised they faced a much bigger problem. Using Pree's influence as the Prelate's daughter, they built a small, secret army in the abandoned village of Het Seborg, and when Tekkinmod put his plans into action, they marched to the people's aid in Wead-Wodder. They defeated Tekkinmod's men and overthrew Pree's father, but this was just a test. Tekkinmod was creating a far bigger and more dangerous alliance in the

north of The Prelates above the line of the Red Mountains, and Pree realised they would have to build a larger army.

Now Redust was no longer a Prelatehood, Pree put in place a mayor-led council to run the country. This mayoral system was strikingly simple. Pree wished to break the system of inheritance and patronage where a country was passed from one man to another like a family heirloom with no consideration of the suitability of the inheritor. No mayor could hold office for more than five years and could not stand again. No mayor could name his or her successor. No relative of a mayor could stand for office. Later this would be known as Pree's Law. I often wonder about this great lady. So much of her life has been forgotten, but the little I have now learned tells of a young woman who really did dream of a better life for people, and wished nothing in return. I am not sure how realistic were hers and Farthing's ambitions, but that they tried to make a difference is important, both then and still now.

The news of what happened in Redust blew across the southern states of the continent of The Prelates like a warm wind. Gradually, below the line of the Red Mountains, more desperate citizens overthrew their Prelates and adopted Pree's Law in one form or another. With leadership from Holin, the mayor of Siinland, they became a strong alliance of small new countries, and Pree was able to build her army, commanded by General Farthing and Major General Ben Lowen.

Pree's Army, as it was known, was highly unusual. Johnson Farthing was just a cart pusher, though he had an exceptional mind. Ben-Lowen had been a sergeant as had Martin Heel and many others. Nearly all the soldiers, men and women, volunteered; it was only much later that some began to receive pay from their countries. It was an army built on desperation, fear perhaps, and a need to defend the common people. Most of all, it was an army based on an idea of friendship, and many new recruits would approach Pree, tell her their name and declare they were her friend.

Unusually, it was also an army with dragons. The Draig do not have wars. They do not have nations, and they do not understand the need for borders. They are far less numerous than humans, and they generally live in small communities. There are no records in any ancient histories that tell of dragons fighting dragons, a fact that I still struggle with, but I am told it is so, and I cannot disprove it. But dragons do make friends, close friends, and have been witnesses to many human wars. At times, they have taken part to defend their friends against injustice and to protect themselves. Such was the case here. Tekkinmod aspired to become an absolute ruler, and he wished to see the end of the dragons. And so, the Draig yr Anialr from Ponack, with the aid of a few Draig Mynyth Coh and Draig Morglas, joined with Pree under the leadership of an old ice dragon called Bren-Diath and the desert dragon Be-Inua.

But despite the passion and justice of Pree's cause, she was hopelessly outnumbered by Tekkinmod's Haften Horde which had enormous resources both in coin and in iron. It soon became evident they would be defeated. Then, from the far west of The Prelates came an unlikely ally. Beyond the range of mountains called The Western Alps was The Western Kingdom. This land, which had spent many years in isolation, had reverted to being duchies of the Heinela Cwendrin, the forgotten foe of the ancient Haftens. A feudal society, the Dukes had become wealthy and powerful with an army of many thousands, and now they approached Pree declaring that she, as the Cwendrina, was their rightful queen, and they were at her command.

Pree was unhappy about taking the throne as she opposed the feudal system. But knowing that she was about to be defeated, and scared that she would lose Farthing in the process, she accepted their offer of an alliance. The knights and infantry of the Heinela Cwendrin marched to

face Tekkinmod under the command of Lord Henry Harnon, Duke of Herondinshire, declaring their fealty to Pree.

But it was a ruse. Lord Henry had no real interest in reviving the ancient Cwendrina, except possibly as a puppet under his control. As part of the agreement, Pree had been joined by Sir Tannon, a knight who was descended from serfs and who was also unhappy with the feudal system. He decided to turn traitor and join Farthing, telling him of his suspicions about Henry's real purpose. This brave and noble man, who Farthing grew to love as a father, put himself and his family in great peril by this action.

As a long, cold winter froze the north of The Prelates, the war ground to a halt. Farthing and Weasel took the opportunity to fly into The Western Kingdom with Fren-Eirol to discover what Henry was really up to. They plied Henry's man in Herondinshire with a drug and discovered the truth behind the deception. Stopping first to rescue Tannon's wife and daughter, they returned with the bad news. Pree was furious when the facts were revealed to her, and she decided to break the alliance. This was a dangerous move, and it was important that first she made sure Henry and Tekkinmod were locked in battle. Farthing put in play a risky plan. He disguised companies of soldiers as Haftens and Heinela Cwendrin and then attacked outposts of the two armies. The deception was a success and he retreated to leave Henry and Tekkinmod to fight it out.

When Henry realised what had happened, he took his revenge. Looking back over the history as I have, this was a quite remarkable error of judgement by the Heinela leader. To send considerable forces against Pree, he had to take soldiers away from the fight with the more powerful Tekkinmod, which makes no sense. He weakened himself simply for an act of vengeance. However, Sir Revan, his nephew and collaborator, successfully turned a handful of southern mayors against Pree, and created his own army to throw at General Farthing.

By this time, Johnson Farthing and Ben Lowen had proved themselves to be masterful tacticians, and they beat back Sir Revan's forces, but at a huge cost in lives. Along the line of the Red Mountains, Sir Tannon's forces were almost obliterated by the Haftens, and Sir Tannon lost his life. Farthing had no choice but to retreat to the south-east of The Prelates, his army much reduced.

Mistry Jinx had become one of the Army's most well-loved heroes. She had paired with the dragon Mab-Onin, and the two were hailed as the greatest dragon-rider pairing in living memory; a long memory for dragons who could live up to a thousand years. They took terrible risks and scouted deep into enemy territory. It was because of them that Pree's Army had managed to beat back an early invasion from Tekkinmod's forces, but in the process, Mab-Onin had lost a leg and Mistry had been near-fatally wounded. The loss of a leg for a greater dragon is a dreadful thing; without the leg, they are unable to take flight. However, Mab-Onin and Mistry worked tirelessly to achieve the impossible, and returned to scouting and spying, again taking risk after risk to protect those they saw as precious family. Mistry uncovered a plot hatched by Lord Henry and Sir Revan to murder Pree using twenty squads of assassins. While Weasel, Mistry, and Martin and Doretha Heel hunted the assassins, Pree was smuggled from The Prelates by boat and taken to the Isle of Hope in the far south of Bind, where she made a temporary home in a small, abandoned fisherman's hut overlooking the warm Missing Sea.

With Pree's Army in retreat, the war between Belin Tekkinmod's Haftens and Lord Henry's Heinela Cwendrin continued, each slowly weakening the other. General Farthing, while keeping watch on the war, rebuilt his forces in the south-east, and Pree travelled to the north of Bind and to Ponack to join forces with the Draig yr Anialr based there. At this time, Mab-Abin, a young

dragon who was brother to Be-Elin, asked Pree to become his rider. I have puzzled long and hard over the relationship between dragon and rider, the pairing that is talked about. Reading the old stories, this was such a great love they shared, a love based on mutual understanding and total trust, vital in flight. I am told the pairing between Mab-Abin and Pree was exceptionally strong.

Weasel had suggested that if Tekkinmod and Henry battled long enough, the eventual victor would be much weakened. General Farthing could then rally his forces and secure a final victory. But Tekkinmod's wealth and resources were of such a size that they feared he would win but still be too powerful for them to defeat. Pree and Weasel took a force of dragons, infantry, and the incredible Pharsil-Hin archers, nomads from the Eastern Plains, and destroyed Tekkinmod's mines and removed his king in Tellmond. At the same time, they released the slaves from the coal mines in Wessen, many of whom were Pharsil-Hin. The nomadic people showed their gratitude by presenting Pree with three hundred Ten-he; Pharsil-Hin archers that would remain her protectors.

Back in the Prelates, Farthing could do nothing else but wait to see how Pree's action in northern Bind affected Tekkinmod's campaign. It was an uncomfortable and tense time, but it was essential they choose their moment very carefully while slowly building their own forces. Sir Tannon's widow Elena approached Farthing saying she wished to return to her home in the Western Kingdom. She wanted to bring Pree's message to the people there, though not with force. This was very dangerous for her, and Farthing sent Weasel to protect her. It had become obvious to all that Weasel and Elena were falling in love, and while in the West, they decided that after the war they would make a life with each other in Sir Tannon's old villa. When Weasel returned to the East, Elena remained in the villa. Unknown to Weasel, she was now pregnant.

Farthing was now in a position to regain the south; all the former Prelatehoods below the line of the Red Mountains. The bloody war between the Haftens and the Heinela Cwendrin had moved much further north, but Henry still had forces in the south. Farthing and Ben Lowen recruited an army of more than nine thousand and marched on Henry's remaining forces. Even though Pree had weakened Tekkinmod, he had proved to be the superior force and had cut off Henry from the Tepid Pass, the Heinela's route of escape back through the Alps to the Western Kingdom. When Farthing confronted Henry's last army, he ordered his own battalions to fall back when he realised the Heinela forces were beaten and demoralised and unable to fight. Henry, enraged by the cowardice of his own men, charged at Pree, but was knocked from his saddle and killed by the arrows of the seven-foot tall Pharsil-Hin.

Many of Henry's knights and soldiers now surrendered and asked to join Farthing's forces so they could together beat back Tekkinmod. Henry had so drained his own people back home of men and taxes to fight the Haftens that the West was now facing a possible civil war, which eventually came to pass. The knights realised that if Tekkinmod won, he could march through the Tepid Pass and wipe them out; they had to throw in their lot with Farthing and Pree. Not an alliance this time; they would take their commands from the young general. General Farthing moved north to Ein Town in Tepid Lakes where he defeated a force of Haftens twice the size of his own army with a mixture of regular and irregular tactics and help from the dragons. However, this would be the last time the dragons would take part.

During the latter stages of the war, a terrible plague arose that killed the dragons without exception, including Mab-Onin. It was thought this disease was caught by dragons from small common creatures, though it was only fatal to dragons. Mab-Tok, Lilygwin, and Weasel desperately sought a cure for the disease, but none could be found. Weasel flew with Fren-Eirol

to The Abbey in the Black Hills, and with Mistry Jinx, delved through all the ancient records to find something that might help the dragons. In the process, they discovered the existence of a third continent, too far away, it seemed, to reach by either dragon or boat. But they were taken to the continent of Angyn by Bell-Sendinar, one of the great Draig Dechrún that can fly all the way around Dirt without stopping. However, they fly too high for a human, and Mistry Jinx nearly died, only surviving with the help of Weasel using his skills. When they reached Angyn, they found a land filled with dragons but no humans. Weasel was told by a Draig Awyr called Biel-Deieler that he was something called an Ancient. He did not understand what that was but realised that so much of what his mother had supposed about him was wrong.

They discovered the disease was not here on Angyn and confirmed Mab-Tok's suspicion that it was not passed from dragon to dragon. If they could find a way for unaffected dragons to fly to Angyn, they would be saved. Using the mighty, enigmatic but affable Draig Dechrún, Mistry and Weasel mapped a complicated route taking advantage of the highest winds and flying over the south pole, Hoar South. The dragons could follow the Scimrafugol, the incredible long-winged birds that fly as high as a dragon and migrate using the winds. When they returned to Ponack, they made up maps and instructions which were taken to all the dragon communities, and the exodus began.

Throughout the war, Farthing and Pree had been frustrated that though they could find Tekkinmod's camps, they could never track him down. It was almost as if he could just vanish at whim. While using his skills to find the location of Tekkinmod's remaining army, Weasel discovered a Wave Talker called Eritarlin, a magician who they knew had helped Tekkinmod before. Realising that the Wave Talker and his Wind Talker wife might have been using their skills to help Tekkinmod hide and travel unnoticed, they ambushed Eritarlin, and Weasel forced him to reveal Tekkinmod's whereabouts. It must have been a terrible day, for though they gained the vital intelligence they needed, Weasel was killed. Mistry Jinx, already upset over the loss of Mab-Onin to the disease, and who had grown so very close to Weasel, was grief-stricken. She took flight on a horse and disappeared from their lives and from the war for good.

General Farthing, not wishing to see any further dragons die, ordered the last of them to evacuate to Angyn, including Be-Elin who had chosen him as her rider, and Mab-Abin, who had chosen Pree as his rider. The dragons left The Prelates and returned to Bind where they scouted out any remaining dragon communities and then flew south and left for the beautiful lands of Angyn.

Farthing and Pree, their army reinforced by troops from the now failing Western Kingdoms, moved on Tekkinmod's forces at Heldon Heights and searched out Tekkinmod himself who had hidden deep in an ancient, ruined Haften stronghold cut into the side of the mountain. Though they were victorious, and the war was now at an end, Pree was tragically killed by an arrow loosed by Belin Tekkinmod. In a moment of grief that he would later admit was a mistake, Johnson Farthing lit her funeral pyre on the tor and renamed the mountain the Beacon of Hope. As the flames reached into the night, the army gathered and chanted "Pree, Pree, Pree, Pree," as they had done before when she was alive.

The aftermath of that war is still confused and is something I have yet to document thoroughly. The Southern States tried to create a federation and asked General Farthing to be their leader, almost a king. He refused. He argued that they were small, often impoverished countries, and they had neither the experience nor the resources to hold such a federation together. With the dragons now gone, distances were much greater, and it took many weeks to take a message across the continent. Pree would have said the same and he told them to just

rebuild as individual countries, as friends for the time being. It seems they ignored his advice and created a federation with a leader. It failed, and within forty years, the newly named country of Preland collapsed, though the continent retained the name.

It seems to me when I look at this history, that not only were the bold ambitions of Farthing and Pree neglected, but as a result, our society is less than it was. Preland and Bind are fragmented places. Our populations now are much reduced, poorer, and our people often live in simple, primitive communities of a kind unknown in Farthing's day. We are ruled by petty kings and barons, where we are ruled at all, know little of our near neighbours, and nothing of lands farther afield. We have forgotten not only this history but who we are. Most have even forgotten the dragons. They have never heard of them or only regard them as creatures of silly tales that are related in places like the Red Stranger Inn.

But what of Johnson Farthing? I have tried to piece together this part of the tale from fragments I have learned. I suppose his story is very personal to some, and there is much hurt that is not discussed in the cold, dry histories. So, forgive me if this is less than accurate, and has elements that could almost be seen as magical that I really do not understand. But I think I have the spirit of the story here.

Farthing returned to Wead-Wodder and for the next couple of years tried to rebuild the town that had been nearly destroyed in the war, living in his old, tiny apartment. At that time, it was a place of optimism and he was a hero, but it was not to last. Belin Tekkinmod was still alive and the two met in the ruins of Slypa Burh and fought to the death. Though Farthing killed Tekkinmod, he was terribly wounded and dying. His friends were unable to help him, and he was carried by boat to the Isle of Taken where his sister now lived. Here too were also the last of the dragons; Mab-Tok the healer, Lilygwin the Draig-Wen, and Fren-Eirol, the beautiful Draig Morglas. Mab-Tok and Lily worked hard to save Farthing and eventually he began to recover. But he could not settle.

He did not want to return to The Prelates where he was still General Farthing, and he felt trapped on the island. Saying goodbye to his sister, he drew his pension and took a boat to Tool in Bind where he planned to start a new life under the name of Mr Goatherd, the slightly comic name given to him by his friend Weasel. While there, he fell gravely ill again and was discovered by Mistry, who had been travelling around Bind on her own in the years since Weasel's death. She had always loved Johnson Farthing, and she took him away from Tool.

The two of them set off south and eventually moved to the Isle of Hope. With them were also some of the riders from Ponack who had had to abandon the town. With the departure and deaths of the Draig yr Anialr, they could no longer defend themselves from the Keffra-See, the desert people of the Eastern Plains. Even the Pharsil-Hin abandoned their ancient lands. To Farthing's horror, the nomads travelled across the ices to The Prelates and to The Beacon of Hope. The Ten-he, the husbands of Pree, should have protected her, the Pharsil-Hin said. They believed they had failed when she had died, and so wished to honour the place of her death. By this time, Mab-Tok and Lily had left for Angyn as had Fren-Eirol. This beautiful Draig Morglas with the distinctive white chest was the last dragon anyone would see.

Farthing never properly recovered from his injuries and he died in his fifties. He had stayed with Mistry all that time and the two loved each other deeply. They had one child, Se-Ini. With his death, Mistry felt she could not stay on the island, and she took passage on a ship to Bind on her own. Over many months, she made her way north and returned to the Abbey where she lived for another two years. But this was not the end for her. She began to understand that when Weasel had helped her survive on their journey to Angyn, he had changed her. She was now

carrying his memories, and they sometimes appeared like a ghost in her imagination that conversed with her. Mistry also realised something else; she wasn't growing older. Travelling across Bind, she had once again regained the fitness and figure of her youth, and looking into a polished copper dish, she saw that she hadn't changed at all. Staring back at her was a young woman of twenty.

One day, as she sat in the Abbey, Bell-Sendinar appeared. The great Draig Dechrún lowered his head to her, and she climbed upon his back. He took her to Angyn so she may live peacefully with those who had become her greatest friends; the Draig of Dirt.

And really, that is the end of that tale from five centuries ago. I have left so much out, and there is more I do not know and will probably never know. Many of the names from that time have been lost to us. General Farthing is remembered by some in Preland but almost no one in Bind. Ben Lowen, Martin and Doritha Heel, and the others that led that ragtag army are forgotten. There must be many, many more. Even some of the places are gone; destroyed by later wars or swallowed up by Dirt itself. But some remain. Farthing and Mistry started a community on the empty and beautiful Isle of Hope. They had a daughter who had a son who kept the name Farthing and passed it on to his children and his children's children. And though Farthing died and Mistry left, and the islanders forgot who they were, the community grew, bathed in the warm waters of the Missing Sea. It is still there, and perhaps it represents a hope the dreams of a red-headed young woman living in a tiny fisherman's hut on an island might yet come true.

Find out More about Dirt

Learn more about the World of Dirt, the characters, the people, the dragons, the history and the background to the story at the special A World Called Dirt website.

More about the books, plus The Abbey, a section dedicated to everything about the world including character lists, pronunciation guides, maps and more. Also, comments from C. C. Hogan, explaining more about how he created the story and why he made certain plot decisions.

Don't worry, each section is marked up so that if you do not want to know details in advance of where you are in the books, you don't have to.

www.aworldcalledirt.com

Books by C. C. Hogan

Dirt – Series Two

Five hundred years have passed since the war in The Prelates, now called Preland after Pree. The people have squandered the legacy left by Pree and Johnson Farthing, and the federation founded by the southern states has collapsed. Across both Preland and Bind, the population is smaller, poorer and fragmented, and the people are ruled by greedy, petty kings, barons and warlords. The humans of Dirt have forgotten their past, have few hopes for their future and the dragons are now nothing more than silly tales in children's stories and songs.

But the disease that threatened to destroy all the dragons has changed and is no longer fatal. And in Angyn, some of the dragons want to come home.

Girls of Dirt

Silvi Farthing did not have the best of childhoods, despite living on the warm, safe Isle of Hope. She is now seventeen, has left her misogynistic family and has started her own little farm, breeding goats and making cheese for the local fishing village of Bay. She knows nothing about her family's history, other than she is related to some man called Johnson Farthing who was a founder of the community on the island centuries before. But when her brothers destroy her farm and attack her, saying that she should be married, she is rescued by the most incredible of creatures; Be-Elin the desert dragon.

So begins a new chapter in the story of Dirt as Silvi, Be-Elin, Mab-Abin and the Ancient Ferret, Weasel's daughter, work to bring back the dragons, and look for a country where they will be accepted by the people and can help build a better future for all of Dirt.

Dragons of Dirt

The dragons are beginning to return, but it is early days and the two kings and their new dragon friends have many hills to climb. But the friends know that without finding the long-lost descendant of the Cwendrina and setting up a council on the Isle of Taken to bring the disparate people of Dirt together, their plans might fail.

Silvi and Ferret with the dragons Mab-Abin and Be-Elin set off across Preland in search of the descendant of Rustina Farthing. But across the Yonder Sea, enemy forces are building and it will down to Edver Kellin and Silvi to defeat these new threats and build new alliances.

People of Dirt

The ghost of General Johnson Farthing has settled on the young shoulders of Silvi Farthing, and more and more, people are turning to her to lead them. In the north of Preland, a new threat is growing, one sworn to destroy the dragons once and for all, and in the beautiful kingdom of Sarn, the warring neighbours have attacked, Queen Fena is dead and the town of Don is besieged.

Can Dragon Leader Silvi and her dragons beat back these new threats? Does this young cheesemaker from the peaceful Isle of Hope have the strength to pick up the banner of her great father Johnson and build a new army?

Read the thrilling conclusion to series two of the fantasy saga, Dirt.

Dirt – Series One

Johnson Farthing is tall, blonde and muscular. He is also desperately poor and makes his living shifting dirt for others in the dusty town of Wead-Wodder, Redust. He knows his life is far from perfect and he, like so many others, is at the bottom of the heap, but he is a young man with an optimistic streak, and he makes the best of a simple life.

But when his red-headed sister is kidnapped along with the daughter of the Prelate, the ruler of Redust, his life is changed forever, and he chases across an ocean and a continent with the help of a strange magician and an incredible sea dragon.

In the first series of Dirt, follow Johnson Farthing and his young friends as they join forces with the huge and beautiful dragons of Dirt to fight against conquerors who would take the world for their own and destroy any who get in the way. This is not a tale of kings or princesses, but of ordinary folk, human and dragon, and their hope that they can build a bright, future based on fairness, equality and freedom.

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The Stink

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About the Author

C.C. Hogan is a writer and musician originally from North London. He is a lover of both London and Fantasy. Find out more at his website: www.cchogan.com