

# **Wandering to Belong**

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Published by Red Feather Writing

Smashwords edition

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## **Acknowledgements**

With thanks to my husband, Phil, for all his support, Adam, for his advice and critique, Keith for an amazing front cover and the rest of the team at Red Feather Writing for getting this story polished and ready for publishing with such efficiency.

And thanks to God, for continually being the best source of inspiration.

## **Dedication**

To Phil. Without you I'd also have to wander alone.

## **The Village**

The flickering lanterns and torches of the small village caught Aneira's eye. Her stomach rumbled as her mind associated the warmth and comfort of the place with good food. Over the last few weeks she had struggled to hunt enough to feed herself, and a village would have crops and other necessities she could trade for.

Making her mind up on that thought alone, she changed direction and trudged over the rocky grassland. As the evening darkened she lowered her head. The lights from the village would taint what little she could see in the dark of night if they were in view. If she also concentrated on each step at a time, it helped to keep her feet going when all they wanted to do was rest; something she had learnt long ago.

Sounds of the village soon greeted her ears and she allowed herself to look up at the hopeful sight. There were a few stone-built houses, not many, but enough to show good masonry, and another handful of wooden houses along the edge nearest to her. She imagined there would be a similar number on the other side of the village.

She looked for the shields of a chieftain or warrior's hut as a few people scurried here and there,

eager to be indoors rather than out in the night. No one noticed her approach and she kept it that way, sticking to the shadows and hedges until she'd checked out the shield's design, if one existed.

As she snuck up into the shadow beside one of the pale stone houses, she noticed what she sought. A shield hung on the building opposite, just below a lit torch. The pattern wasn't one she recognised, which meant that this village didn't submit to any Lords she knew of. She would have to take her chances on the unknown.

She slunk back the way she had come to double back and enter into the village along the dirt track. Coming into the centre of the village in full view would make her look less like a threat.

Previously, she'd walked straight into any civilisation, but she'd soon learnt to be wary of certain Lords' holdings. When she crept in she found people were suspicious, and being driven off when she was this hungry didn't appeal to her.

Once she was out in the open she lowered her hood from her smooth black hair. She kept it short, to help keep it neat and tidy, but strands still framed her thin face. When she'd patted down her hair to neaten it, she stowed her bow on her back, and rearranged her small pack of belongings to make sure straying hands couldn't get into it without alerting her.

With slow, deliberate steps she made her way into the village. The first woman who saw her didn't even acknowledge she existed, and this helped Aneira feel more at ease. The next nodded briefly before continuing with her business.

So far they looked like a busy, but fairly poor, farming community with not much to worry about in terms of safety. There wasn't even a small jail or military-type building. Just the chief's house, an inn and a few other slightly smaller stone houses for the richer of the people, probably the actual land owners. She'd not seen any cattle, and there didn't appear to be any horses in the two-berth stable.

Most people had shuttered up their houses already and light only leaked out around older windows in need of maintenance. But the tavern had a few windows open and the noise of laughter and conversation greeted her.

As she reached the door she sucked in her breath, tried to look as harmless as possible, and pushed into the tavern. Immediately, the room went quiet and all eyes turned her way. She did her best to appear calm as she walked up to the bar and the man who stood behind it, drying some metal tankards with a dirty looking cloth.

"Good evening," she said, breaking the silence.

"Evenin' stranger. What can I get you?"

"I'm afraid I've not got any money. I've been travelling a long while, but I can work hard. Do you know of anyone here who might need some work doing in return for some food and a bed for the night?"

The barkeep looked thoughtful while the whole inn around her remained silent. She knew everyone had heard her words, but it seemed none of them were going to help. Just as she was about to tell him not to worry and that she'd move on, he put his tankard down and walked through to the back room.

"Darlin', do yah want some 'elp with the dishes? Got a whelp 'ere who wants to do somethin' fer a spot o' food and a place to kip."

Aneira couldn't hear the reply as the door swung shut behind the bulk of the owner, but it seemed like they were going to take pity on her anyway. Still looking young had its benefits. While she stood waiting for the landlord to come back, conversations around her started up again and people went back to their drinks. So far so good.

The door swung open again and the tavern owner stepped out. He held the door open and motioned with his head for her to go through. She smiled as she rushed around the bar to do as he asked.

As soon as she stepped through into the kitchen the smell of hot food assaulted her senses. The woman at the stove was almost as large as the tavern owner himself. They all obviously ate well, and with any luck would treat her to a similarly sized meal. She nodded at the middle-aged woman as she was being looked over.

"I'm Aneira. What would you like me to do?" she said after a moment's wait.

"The dishes need doin' fer starters, then we'll see what else there is."

She nodded and looked over at the sink. It was stacked full of pots, pans, dirty plates and tankards; eating would have to wait.

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Aneira sank into the wooden chair, not sure if the creaking noise was the wood as she sat down or her knees, from standing so long. It had taken her several hours to battle through the mountain of washing up, especially as every little thing that Heulwen thought might need cleaning had been put into the sink at some point. Her fingers were wrinkled and her nails had never looked so clean, but she had finally finished and the couple had seemed impressed with her work.

While she waited for the food she'd been promised she had a proper look around the inn. Now that it was later many of the villagers had gone to their homes, but a few remained and continued to chatter. Most of them were considerably less sober than they had been when she'd arrived, but a couple were still steady on their feet.

The landlord made her jump as he put a plate down in front of her.

"Ere you go, lass, tuck into that."

She needed no second encouragement and bit straight into the hot pork pie, following it with several shovellings of creamy mashed potato and gravy. Within minutes the slice of pie and mash had gone, and before the owner could return with a drink for her she'd started on the bread and butter beside.

"Thank you, Merrion," she said around a mouth full of bread dipped in the gravy. She picked up the tankard and almost downed the sweet liquid. It wasn't something she'd ever drunk before, but it didn't have the bitter after-taste alcohol did, so she figured it was safe to guzzle.

"Well, that didn't take long. Will you be wantin' some more?" Merrion said as she wiped the plate clean with the last hunk of bread. Her eyes went wide and she stared at him for a moment. The plate had been a feast to her, and here he was asking if she wanted more. She nodded her head vigorously in case he changed his mind. The man just chuckled and she found herself grinning at how much of his body wobbled up and down, even after he'd stopped laughing.

Once he'd returned with a second plate, filled with an equal portion as before, he left her to eat and went back to his bar and customers. She took her time with the seconds, noticing an unfamiliar feeling of fullness in her stomach. It didn't stop her demolishing the food again, however.

The tavern soon closed and Merrion came and sat down with her, bringing her another drink at the same time.

"We've got a spare bed, up in the loft. You can kip in it when you're ready, then you'd best be on your way tomorrow and get as far from 'ere as you can." The tone of his voice peaked her curiosity. It had been a while since she'd heard fear in a grown man's voice. Especially one who didn't seem to have anything to fear.

"What if I want to stay a bit longer?"

"You'd be a fool. You've got sense, I can see it behind those eyes of yours. Get yourself up and gone first thing in the mornin' and make sure you're as far away as you can get by the followin' day."

"Why, what's going to happen?"

Whatever it was, the inn keeper wouldn't say any more about it, and before she could think of another way of asking to get him talking again, Heulwen came out of the kitchen and ushered them both upstairs to sleep.

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With some fresh bread and cheese in her pack, Aneira set out from the inn to walk along parallel to the mountain ridge in the north. Heulwen and Merrion had reiterated their warning of the night before and told her to get herself as far from the village as possible and not look back.

Neither would tell her why, but they'd bundled up some food, helped her stow it with the few belongings she had, and ushered her out the door.

The sun had barely lifted from its embrace with the horizon and a chill still hung on the morning

air. No time had been wasted getting her up and gone, but she had no intention to do as she was told. Whatever bothered them must affect the whole village.

There were several crop fields in the direction she headed and she could already see a young farm hand spreading seed in the rich dirt of the neatly ploughed furrows. As she saw him, a grin spread across her face.

When she was close enough for him to notice her, she waved. He waved back but didn't stop his job. The gate to the field was open near her so she wandered towards it and leant up against the fence post. After a few minutes the lad had reached her.

With a nervous shake of his hand he swept his blond hair out of his eyes and looked at her.

"Hi," she said and gave him the warmest smile she could muster.

"Hi there. I've not seen you afore, in our village, I mean. You must be new." Her smile grew even broader at the cute way he stumbled over his words.

"I'm just passing through. I slept at the tavern for the night. Now I'm on my way again."

"That's probably fer the best. You'll be walkin' fast, I bet."

"Well, maybe." Just as she finished her sentence a new thought hit her. "I'm reasonably tempted to stay. There's food here, a warm bed, and well, nice people, like you, to talk to."

The young lad almost dropped his handful of seed at her words and his face flushed.

"You see, no one's told me why I should be leaving and I'm wondering if, maybe, just maybe, there's more reasons for me to stay."

"No, you should go." His reply made her pout and widen her eyes.

"You don't like talking to me then?"

"No... It's... No, I like talkin' to you. It's just, you should go. It's not safe. Not fer someone your age."

"You can't be that much older than me."

"I'm not, but you need to leave." His eyes went wider than before and Aneira knew something was making him scared.

"Why do I need to leave? I want to know."

He looked away and shifted his feet from side to side.

"Come on, you can tell me. Who am I going to ever tell? I'm always alone."

"Well, if you promise to leave when you know..."

"When I know I'm in danger, I'll leave the village boundaries. You have my word." She beamed at him again, hoping he wouldn't notice the subtle way she'd adjusted the promise. He didn't.

"Alright, I guess it can't do no harm then. It started afore I was born. There's a group o' goblins up in the mountains, north. They came down and attacked the village, wantin' to eat us. There was no way we could win so the chief made a bargain with them. In return fer lettin' us live all year round, once a year they get to take five o' the villagers. The five are picked by council each year, whoever's the least 'elp to us."

Aneira could hardly believe what she was hearing. The thought of them being so callous shocked her. The boy obviously noticed her face.

"Don't think we don't care about the ones sacrificed. If we had any other way o' savin' the village, we would. There just ain't enough men who know how to fight, and the goblins are crafty; sometimes they don't accept who we offer, then they pick the strongest and fastest, any they think might one day try and fight back. We all know a few die to save the rest."

"But it keeps happening, year after year?"

"Ahhah," he nodded, "Every year they come back for more."

"So these goblins are due tomorrow?" The boy's head bobbed up and down again. "How many are there?"

He looked blankly at her.

"How many goblins are there in the mountains?" she said, clarifying the meaning behind her question.

"I dunno. More than we have people to fight."

"How many able villagers are there, I mean besides you?"

"I dunno how to fight," he said, blushing for the second time. "Why do you wanna know this anyway? You should get goin'. Like you promised."

"I will in a moment, but before I do I have two more questions. Both are very important."

"All right, but be quick, you've already wasted lots o' time."

"Firstly, how many goblins come to collect the sacrifices each year? And what's the name of the lovely guy I just met?"

He furrowed his brow for a moment, not understanding her last question at all, but she didn't say anything. Eventually the penny dropped.

"Oh, my name's Gwain. And, er, I think last year there were 'bout twenty goblins in the village. Nasty things they are too."

"Thank you, Gwain. I'm Aneira." She stood on the ends of her toes and kissed his cheek. "I'll get going now."

He nodded, overcome and unable to speak. She waved and walked off down the little lane between the fields. Despite her promise, she had no intention of leaving. These people had been lovely to her since she'd arrived the night before and, if she could, she wanted to help them.

The goblins were only asking for five people per year, which was probably as many children as the villagers had per year. With any luck, that meant there weren't many more goblins than Gwain had seen. It left her a little mystified as to why the villagers couldn't deal with the problem themselves. She estimated the goblin numbers to have to be at least thirty or so before the village would be unable to cope.

Aneira had dealt with small bands of goblins before and knew that even if she couldn't stop this year's sacrifice from happening, if she could find out where they lived she would be able to pick off a few at a time and hopefully whittle down their numbers to the point where the village could finish them off. This all assumed her luck didn't run out and she wasn't killed by the goblins in one of her guerrilla attacks, but she knew she was likely to be a better fighter than any warrior in the small village she'd just left behind.

Being alone had forced her to learn fast, and her archery was lightning-quick, even if it wasn't always perfectly accurate. On top of that, she could cause a lot of damage with traps. All she needed to do was find out where they were and sneak around them.

When the village was so far behind her none of its residents could be seen, she changed direction and headed north. The farther she went the more the ground changed from the soft dirt the village farmed into the rocky terrain of the skirts of the mountain. She slowed and kept her eyes peeled for movement up ahead.

As the day wore on, she made an effort to keep near the shelter of the trees and bushes dotting the landscape. If goblins did come into sight, she wanted to hide as soon as possible. It would not be good if they saw her. This led to a weaving pattern in her path as she wound her way around open spaces.

By the time the afternoon was almost gone she had covered less than eight miles of terrain north, and the mountains still loomed ahead. She noticed an old building off to the east that had blended into the mountain's rock-face until she'd got this close. There were very few roofs left, and several walls and rooms had crumbled away from neglect and weathering, but the ruin looked like it had once been a very large and impressive castle.

Eventually, she noticed a thick set of gorse bushes she could hide in the centre of to await signs of the goblins. By now she'd hoped to find them, but it seemed they would travel past this point sometime in the night. She shuddered when she thought of their intentions and settled down for the wait, using extra branches and dirt to further conceal her temporary hiding place.

Once she'd eaten some of her rations, she made herself comfortable to wait for the dusk to come and finish shielding her from sight. Hopefully, the goblins would carry torches to light the way and she'd see them pass nearby. Her viewpoint was near the top of the hill and it spread out for a fair distance around her, making an excellent vantage point, so it was likely she'd spot the goblins without needing to move.

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Aneira rubbed her hands over her eyes, trying to force them to stay open. It didn't help. Both her legs had gone to sleep and her fingers were stiff from the cold night air. Dawn was still a long way off. Reaching into her pack, she pulled out a small hunk of the cheese and nibbled on it. At the very least if, she fell asleep after eating it, she would get nightmares in recompense for her folly.

When her eyelids drooped for the fifth time that minute she realised she would need to move soon or sleep would overtake her senses. She stifled a yawn and lifted her torso off the ground. As soon as she was crouched, still able to scan the horizon around her, she re-strapped her pack and quiver to her back, making sure they were exactly where they needed to be, before picking up her bow.

Cramp filled her right hand as it clasped the thin wood her weapon was made from. She had let her fingers get too cold. After emptying her hand again she brought both up to her mouth and blew the warmer air from her lungs over them. Once they thawed a little she flexed her fingers, trying to work the warmth back through to the depths of the bone, but she still couldn't grip her bow yet.

All the while, as she did this, she kept her eyes on the terrain around her. She blinked a few times as she realised up ahead and to the right a flame was bobbing along. At first she wasn't completely sure that her eyes weren't playing tricks on her and just seeing what they'd wanted to see all night, but as time passed she became convinced a small party was moving in the direction of the village.

As the light came closer, she hunkered back down into her little den and tried to make out who carried it. She soon realised there were actually several lights, and they were farther off to her right than she'd originally estimated. Not wanting them to get out of sight before she'd established whether they were goblins or not, she got up from her hiding place and moved as silently as she could in their direction.

Before she could get much closer they had already passed perpendicular to her original position, placing her behind whoever moved through the night. Over the next few minutes she curved her path to get closer to the walkers and could soon make out the outlines of the gangly dark green creatures that everyone called goblins.

They shuffled along, a group of twenty-six by her rough count. There were five torches amongst them and they were all armed to the teeth with a selection of maces, swords, shields, helmets and spears; there was even a quiver or two that she thought she saw, strapped to a few of the knobbly backs.

She kept her distance and snuck along after them, repeating her pattern of moving between the cover the terrain provided. There was little chance that they would see her while it was still dark but dawn was not far off and then she would need to be very careful. She had never hunted goblins like this before; deer and other wild animals, but never something that would turn around and kill her if she was noticed.

As she slunk over rocks and around bushes, her tiredness dropped from her limbs to be replaced by the slight buzz of adrenaline. Despite her lack of sleep she felt fresh and revitalised. The abundance of food the evening before had probably helped. She hadn't eaten like that in months.

A few hours passed and the sky turned from its deep, star-studded black to the blue of dawn. Now Aneira's skills would be put to the test. She dropped back from the goblins and crouched behind bushes at the first hint that any of them would look back.

Even if she had to drop behind so they were out of sight, it wouldn't matter now. The light was showing her a path created by their feet and blades. They trampled everything and hacked at any branches that came too close.

When the sun rose to run through another day she dropped back further still and let the goblins become specks of green and movement on the horizon. Now she could move out in the open a bit more without them noticing her.

Either because they didn't like the sunlight, or because they were late, they picked up the pace and she matched it, not wanting them to be too far ahead.

While she followed, she started to plan how she would attack. She needed to somehow gather them into smaller groups and pick them off. She didn't have enough arrows for every single one of them either, so traps would be needed. If she had known where they were coming from in advance

she could have laid many traps the previous day, but that couldn't be helped now.

Along the way she spotted several places to set good death traps but didn't have the time to stop and make them; not even the most simple of set-ups.

She frowned as she also realised the goblins ahead had sped up for the second time and were now out of sight. Almost all of the eight miles she had travelled the day before she had now retraced.

Aneira stopped at the next place she saw where she could make a trap. The goblins were going to the village and would come back this way. On top of that, she finally had some kind of attack plan. It made no sense to follow them any longer and use up energy she could employ elsewhere.

She nibbled on some more bread and cheese as she looked over the site she'd chosen for the first trap, as well as the resources nearby, at her disposal. There were a lot of bushes and branches but not much else, so she decided to build a simple pit trap and fill it with spikes. It would take a while but wouldn't use up anything she carried with her.

After pulling out her knife, she hacked off a nearby branch and began sharpening the end. The noise of wood being shaved off filled the air around her as she quickly worked. Within minutes she'd made a small pile of stakes at her feet.

While she was reaching for another branch to use she heard the sound of something behind her. She turned to see five goblin scouts aiming arrows right at her.

"What do we 'ave 'ere? We've been watchin' you follow us fer some time now, little girl. Why don't you come wiv us so you can explain to our boss why?" the middle goblin said in a deep harsh voice.

Aneira frowned as they shoved her forwards and took her knife right out of her hands. There was no point fighting back, so she let them take her bow and quiver as well. Thankfully, her cloak hid her small pack and they didn't notice it was there to remove. In the open, as they were, she had no hope of beating them in a fight. As she walked she mentally kicked herself for letting them capture her. She should have suspected there would be more, and not stayed where she could be so easily spotted.

None of them spoke to her but they force marched her at a fast pace to catch up with the group ahead. By this point the village itself was not far off and she could see smoke from their chimneys as well as just about identify the scarecrow from Gwain's field.

The goblins ahead soon saw her and the scouts, and stopped to hear about her capture. There was a slightly bigger goblin, whose eyes bulged when he glared. He had a leather jerkin on, compared to only the bare chests and loin cloths of the others.

She tried not to let her fear show when she realised she was now surrounded by over thirty of the smelly creatures and the leader was staring right at her. His eyes swept over her and a grin showed his crooked teeth that were stained so badly they were almost black.

"Well, well, we've got extras today boys." The odour on his breath assaulted her nose, making her sway back in disgust. They all sniggered at her.

"We found 'er tryin' to sneak up on you lot and layin' some sort o' trap," the goblin who captured her said.

"Well, sneak. Is that what you were tryin'?"

"No, I was trying to make a hide to sleep for a few hours. Why don't you let me go? I'm just a simple wanderer, I'll be right on my way."

This garnered even more of the raucous noise the goblins made in place of laughing. No surprises that they weren't going to let her go. She hadn't really thought they would, but anything was worth a try.

"Come on, we've got places to be, and you'll be extra meat fer our feastin'."

A hand shoved her from behind again and she wobbled precariously before finding her balance. With a gloomy expression, she allowed herself to be marched right back into the village. The hustle and bustle she'd seen the morning before had gone completely. Each house was fully shuttered up and no one was outside.

The goblin horde strode right into the centre of the village and made themselves comfortable

around the well there. For the moment, she found herself a little less surrounded. She pinpointed the goblin who had her weaponry and slowly meandered a little closer to him.

"I'm not fond o' waitin'. Bring out our gift!" the leader yelled before she could get very far. She stopped dead in her tracks, wracking her brains for something she could do to stop this carnage.

The door to the chief's house opened up and a middle aged man with a fiery red beard walked out. Behind him filed five much younger villagers, four boys and one girl, their hands bound and each one gagged. Several had tear-stained faces but none of them made a sound now, with only their eyes betraying the fear they all felt.

Following them was Gwain, holding the other end of the rope that bound them all together and ensuring none of them could run. His eyes remained downcast as the goblin and chief stared each other down for a moment. She knew this couldn't be easy for any of them, but surely fighting was better.

As the prisoners were released to be handed over, Gwain looked up. His eyes went wide as he saw her and realised she was also their captive.

"Aneira, I told you to get as far away as possible!" he yelled. She stifled her groan as every goblin took notice.

"So you were spyin' on us, you little sneak. You'll pay for lyin'. We don't like being lied to and we'll make sure you squeal plenty for it, won't we, boys?" There were more chuckles and sneers from the goblins around her.

"All right. I admit. I was following you. I want you to take me instead of these five." She immediately noticed the hopeful looks on the faces of the five, "Let them go. I'm worth all of them. I could easily hunt and kill all five and..."

"Shut up, you maggot. I ain't making no different bargains. You'll come along like the rest o' them."

Aneira could have screamed in frustration at that moment but she knew it wouldn't have helped. Instead, she turned her focus back on getting out of there. Especially as the goblins moved their gaze back to the five prisoners. She shuffled a little closer to her weapons, which had recently been placed on the ground so the goblin could help secure the children.

No one paid her any attention as there was a scuffle and the girl tried to run for it. Aneira seized her chance, grabbing her stuff and legging it back the way she'd come. As she did, she shouldered her quiver and notched an arrow to the string. The sounds of pursuit came to her as she rounded the edge of one of the houses. Using her turning momentum she spun to send the arrow through the throat of the nearest goblin. He gurgled deep green blood in response.

Without waiting to see how many followed her, she started running again, forcing her legs to pump up and down as fast as she could while keeping her balance.

As she reached the gate she'd talked to Gwain at she turned again, and another of her arrows went flying. This time she took a moment to check the scene. Another goblin down and only twenty-nine to go. But so far only a third of them were chasing her. The longer she eluded capture the more likely they would be to all pursue her and leave the village and the other five victims alone, so she turned and sprinted off again.

The goblins did not seem as used to running as she was, at least not flat out, and they soon fell behind. This made Aneira feel better, but she would not be able to keep it up either. As her pursuers trailed out of range of her bow she slowed a little, allowing herself to jog at a fast pace rather than sprint.

When the goblins caught up a little she turned and fired again, but this time her arrow only caught the edge of an arm and they all kept running at her. She frowned as she realised her knife was still with whoever had taken it.

Her breath came in ragged gasps as she ascended one of the many hills ahead of her. Right at the top she took another opportunity to turn and fire. One more fell to die, as another slowed and dropped back from the chasing pack. For her hastily made plan to work, this goblin would need to report to their boss and encourage the rest to join the chase. Hopefully, this horde's leader was proud and would take her escape to heart.



Either way, she could only run for so long. With no traps to aid her and nothing nearby to hide in, she did the only thing she could think of and ran for the massive fortress-like ruins she had seen the previous day.

At the top of each hill she turned and fired another arrow. Roughly half the time the missiles found their mark, but it was not enough. Her arrows were running out faster than her targets. As she climbed yet another hill her thighs protested at the strain and she stumbled over a loose rock.

She glanced behind to find the gap had closed again to no more than about fifteen metres and more goblins were racing in from behind that. The whole horde now chased her to the mountains.

Knowing she would want some arrows for emergencies, she stopped glancing behind her and turning around, so she could concentrate all her effort on reaching the ruins. None of them had fresh legs anymore, but as their leader joined them the horde seemed to take on a new lease of life. Soon she could hear their feet pounding behind her and they jeered at her between their own rapid breaths.

Arrow shafts started to fall around her, forcing her to weave a little and use up even more energy, and still they kept coming after her. As she reached another vantage point she stopped and wheeled around on the balls of her feet. She fired three arrows in rapid succession into the three nearest goblins.

At such close range her aim was good enough to kill two instantly and mortally wound the other. The rest hesitated. They wanted to catch her but goblins were more cowardly than they liked to make out. She'd killed over a third of their number now and still ran.

Their hesitation bought her some distance again and she continued the race for her life, now far enough ahead that she was out of their bow range once more. Despite her new advantage, thoughts of her own death tried to invade her mind. It took all her remaining willpower to keep slogging on and not give up.

She no longer looked back to see what might come. The horde leader could be heard encouraging the other goblins to speed up and get closer to her, but after a few minutes of this they didn't sound any nearer. Eventually the chief gave up and they contented themselves with staying the same distance behind.

Knowing their tactic was to wear her out, she concentrated on conserving her energy, using her arms to swing and aid her momentum, as well as controlling her breathing. Her tongue was like sandpaper in her mouth and she really wanted a drink, but she couldn't stop for that now.

Just as she thought she could not make her body go any further she looked up and noticed the ruins were a lot closer than they had been the day before. She had already run past the place she'd settled in for the night and covered at least half the distance between there and the ruins. On top of that, the sky was getting darker. Several gloomy-looking clouds had rolled in, and they helped make it feel like the evening and the blackness of night were coming soon.

Both these things filled her with enough hope to tuck her head back down, continue up the next slope and conquer the final hill, before heading down to the very skirt of the mountain and the main climb to the ruins up above her. As she started up the final slope, it soon became apparent the goblins were hesitating again and getting even farther behind.

Aneira glanced over her shoulder a few times before she realised they were bothered by the ruins. Their heads darted up to look at it before casting furtive glances at their own leader and then, if not watched, they lagged behind a little.

A laugh almost escaped her as she watched the strange switching behaviour where each goblin who slunk to the back of the group would find himself at the front again after the rest of the horde had repeated the process. Only their leader kept any kind of steady pace, and tried to encourage them on.

Whatever bothered them about the ruins must be serious if it stopped them from pursuing her as ruthlessly when their determination had already seen them run over ten miles. She hoped they felt like they couldn't show weakness to the village. No doubt they would drag her back there if captured and make a public example of her, all because she'd dared to stand up to them in front of the village chief.

She lifted her head and scanned the edges of the rock construction, looking for a way into the building. When she spotted a possible entrance, she put on a final sprint uphill to the finish. By the time she reached the top her thighs ached with the build of effort, and she felt like she might throw up, but she knew she could hardly slow down now.

The building offered her immediate protection from arrows, but the goblins were still coming, and she would need to find a very good hiding place for there to be any chance they would pass her by. Through the great, black stone archway she raced, and then along, glancing at any open doorways with long ago disintegrated doors.

There were several rooms to each side, but they all looked to be dead ends, and she had no choice but to flee farther into the expansive building, like a rat before a flood.

After a few more minutes of running she heard the sound of the goblins behind her. Their conversation as they entered through the arch was picked up by the acoustics and echoed around her. She strained her ears to make out what was said, but only caught the continued commands forcing them after her.

Her flight continued until she saw a large room up ahead through a doorway that had also started deteriorating. As she got closer she realised the floor had fallen through, and it forced her to slow.

When she reached the edge she looked down. Over five floors had fallen down to reveal a dank cave at the bottom. This building had not only been made out of the rock around it but carved down into it as well. It was huge, and the only way to continue was on a small ledge that ran all the way around the sides.

As she looked down again she gulped. If she didn't work her way around the room she would have to face the goblins and they were still close behind her. She could hear at least a small group of them coming up the long corridor. They were still a good distance away and had slowed their pace, but they were advancing on her and she couldn't let them get too near.

Taking a deep breath to try and calm herself down, she shuffled sideways along the edge, her back pressed up against the wall and her arms out, running along it, for balance. She held her bow in one hand and an arrow in the other, just in case she needed to deter her pursuers from getting too close.

She'd moved about three metres out onto the ledge when she noticed some movement on the other side of the room. The large arched exit into another great chamber stole her focus, as she saw the face of the largest scaly lizard she had ever encountered. As it came forward she noticed the wings and tail.

When she had been little her parents had told her tales of dragons, but she'd never seen one and had assumed they were a myth. Now her gaze locked with this one. Its eyes were a deep amber colour that seemed to suck her into them, and its scales were ebony black. She'd never seen anything so beautiful and terrifying at the same time.

For a moment neither of them moved, then all of a sudden it sucked in its breath and she watched as smoke started to billow from the dragon's nostrils.

"Oh, crapola," she said, just as flames burst from its mouth and came towards her at speed. There was only time to cover her face with her hands and close her eyes before the flame ball engulfed her. Her jaw clenched against the pain and then all of a sudden the fire was gone, except it wasn't. Her clothes, bow, quiver and even a small part of the ledge she stood on were now alight.

She tried frantically to beat the flames out with her hands but it just resulted in her wobbling over the drop. As everything slowed around her, her arms hung in the air before falling to her sides, and she glanced once more at the dragon. Its eyes had never left her and she saw no mercy in them.

The sounds of the horde no longer came to her. All she could hear was the slow crackle of flames as they flickered over her blistering skin. She watched the flames crackling on her arm for a moment, mesmerised by the difference in speed of the world around her in comparison to normal.

Something twinkled out of the corner of her eye and she looked down towards it. The cave below her had water on the bottom, and she could see a small star reflected in it.

Water! Water puts out fire. She blinked and hesitated. There was no other way but to jump the five levels and hope the water was deep enough. As the pain grew worse she commanded her body

to do just that. Nothing happened.

“Jump,” she cried out and finally she unfroze and flung herself over the edge. As she fell, the air whistling past her fanned the flames even fiercer and the pain of being burnt alive raged across every part of her touched by the lit clothes.

With a resounding splash she hit the water at the bottom and sunk into its icy embrace. The force stung her skin on top of the already painful burns and she dropped her bow in shock. Doing everything she could to ignore how much she hurt she swivelled herself around in the water, trying to find the surface and get some air into her lungs.

As she thrashed around she felt all the pain and coldness fade from her. Her limbs went heavy and her eyelids started to close. She only had time to think she hadn't wanted to go out this way before she lost consciousness and slipped into oblivion.

## **The Bringer of Judgement**

A small feeling of unease crept over Cathal as he lay, trying to sleep away the evening. Something different was in his domain, something new. He lifted himself to his feet and stretched his spine out from the back of his neck right down to the tip of his tail. A few scales pulled as they caught momentarily on their neighbours.

Heading towards the intruder, he paced down the nearest broad flight of steps. He sniffed the air a little but couldn't make out any scent yet. Whoever it was, they were near the far entrance and didn't smell too strong. Not like the goblins and other foul creatures that sometimes strayed into his lair.

Once he reached the bottom of the first massive flight of steps he could sense the intruder even more. It was one lone person, moving towards him and at a fast pace, on the same level as the main hall. A grin spread across his face as he remembered what they were about to stumble across. Hopefully they'd be moving too fast to stop.

He slunk down until he was in the room opposite. When he realised that the intruder was a female, he hesitated. No woman had ever been a dragon slayer before. Only men came to try and hunt him, but it explained why the feeling had been different.

His eyes roved over her until he saw her bow. Regardless of her gender she was a hunter, and it left him with only one choice: to kill or be killed. He stepped forward and spurted out as much fire as he could manage in one breath. Satisfied it had done its job, he watched as she burnt, until she dove off.

As she plunged beyond sight into the lake, he felt her life force fading. A few more minutes and she would be dead. He lowered his head; it saddened him that so many of the humans met their end this way. There had never been any wish for dragons to go to war with men, but he wouldn't let them kill him just to soothe their egos.

Just as he turned to leave he caught the smell of goblins and noticed a group of them also near the entrance to his domain. After moving his bulk out of sight of the main hall he closed his eyes and focused his power to listen to them.

“Why'd we 'ave to be the ones goin' after her? We won't get to eat'er, the boss will when we've got'er back.”

“The boss'll let us eat some o' those others though. And I ain't gonna challenge him. Did you see Mugrat? The boss chopped 'im in'alf.”

“Don't tell me yer alright with gettin' in range o' that bow. She's skewered yer arm already. And there's that dragon. I don't wanna meet 'im.”

Cathal frowned. The woman he'd just toasted must have been running from the goblins and defending herself. With a speed that seemed surprising for his bulk he slunk off to go down to the lake, staying where the goblins wouldn't see him. He knew now that he should have trusted his gut and waited for a little longer before burning her.

He sniffed warily at the entrance to the lake's cave, but the goblins were still not at the opening.

After crawling forward he slid into the watery depths, putting all his effort into pin-pointing her aura. The woman's body was already lying at the bottom, on top of the remains of the floor. If anyone else had found her it would already be too late, but he could still sense her spirit clinging to the body.

With one front claw he picked up her body and then he pushed up for the surface again. Within seconds he had her out on the lake edge and had silently emerged from the water as well. Knowing he had no time to get either of them to safety, he closed his eyes and concentrated all his effort on healing, first her lungs from the water damage, and then the burns that covered her body.

As soon as every hurt was repaired she started to grow stronger again. He picked her unconscious body up and left the exposed area. It had been a long time since he had used his power to save someone's life and it reminded him of how much he preferred it to killing.

Now that he'd healed her he didn't really know what to do with her. There was no way he wanted to take her up to his lair, especially given that he'd just almost killed her. He couldn't be confident that she wouldn't react by trying to kill him, but he couldn't just leave her anywhere with goblins looking for her. She might wake up as their prisoner, or not wake up at all.

After wandering his halls for several minutes he decided to place her in a small room out of the way in some of the more intact parts of the fortress. He could prowl nearby until she was awake and ensure no goblins found her, thereby fixing his mistake and making up for it, at least a little. As soon as she had regained her feet he could retreat to his watching place to stay out of all their affairs.

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Several hours later Aneira woke up. She gasped in the fresh air, her mind still thinking she was underwater and drowning. Her eyes went wide as she tried to take in the light of the surroundings. A small torch was lit in the corner of the room. It made it light enough to see but little else.

Her clothes were still sodden, as was her pack, ruining all her food and rendering her tinder useless. All the burn marks remained on her clothes and she could smell the charred material, but her skin was flawless. Even a few of the scars she'd picked up on previous occasions were gone. Whatever, or whoever, had saved her had done a good job. She already knew she wasn't in any kind of heaven.

The room she woke up in was the same black stone as the rest of the fortress had been. That also meant the goblins would be about somewhere and, more than likely, still looking for her. She shivered.

No matter how long she sat there, her mind just couldn't cope with knowing she had been dying and then found herself alive. After prodding her own face and arms several times she realised she would have to accept she was alive and get moving. All her weapons were gone and she would need to search for some new ones, while staying away from both the horde and the dragon.

She got to her feet, wrung as much water out of her clothing and equipment as she could, grabbed the lit torch, and headed up one of the spiral staircases set into a tower. It was the sort of climb that would keep her out of sight and let her hear if there was anything nearby long before it might see her. It also appeared to be too narrow for the dragon, another thing in its favour.

An hour passed before she even heard anything nearby. Just as she came up to a corner in a corridor, the sound of someone shuffling along came to her ears. She crouched low and shielded her torch from view. Whoever it was, they were too close for her to run away in time. She would have to jump them and use their own weapons against them. Not an easy task, but she had no choice.

While she waited she kept her breathing calm and her head focused, but after several minutes nothing came out and the sounds started moving away from her again. She clenched her jaw and poked her head around the corner just in time to see two goblins head down a set of steps over fifty metres away.

The hallways must have amplified the noise of their movement and if that happened to them it would most definitely be happening to her as well. Not knowing what to do, she waited where she was for some time.

So far, she had walked through the ruins looking for a weapon, or something she could use as

one, but this just kept her close to danger. Instead, she would be better off avoiding all goblins and finding another exit from this place. It was so large there had to be another way out. On top of that, she also needed food. She had some water left in a small flask, but it had probably been tainted by the lake water, and that had definitely not been clean.

With a new plan of action, she crept as silently as she could the same way the goblins had gone, but went up instead of down.

More time passed as she snuck around, being even more careful to keep quiet than before. She walked along to the other side of the fortress, finding it much brighter. There were many windows set into the walls, and another day had dawned, albeit a rather wet and dreary one, but it still meant she could put out her torch and avoid drawing extra attention to herself.

She put her hands out of a window and let the pouring rain fill them for her to drink. It took a long time for her to collect enough to even moisten her mouth and throat, but it was a start. She also noticed she was a good deal farther up than the main entrance. Whoever had saved her life and moved her had brought her up several floors, and she had climbed three more herself since.

She had just slurped up her fourth palm full of water when a sound behind her made her spin on the spot. Two goblins rushed her.

With lightning-fast reactions, she ducked. Both blades swung over her head and one goblin's momentum carried him right over her and towards the window ledge. She grabbed his legs and lifted.

"Aaaarggh!" he cried while he plummeted towards the rocks many stories below. She didn't wait to find out if it killed him as her second foe tried to slice her open again. This time she rolled out of the way and scrambled to her feet. His sword clanged as it struck the rock where she had been. The force sent a shock-wave up the goblin's arm.

Seizing her chance, she kicked him in the side with all the force she could muster. He went sprawling, leaving his sword behind. Both scrambled to get to it before the other, but she was the faster of the two. As soon as her fingers were wrapped around its hilt she swung it backwards and cut off three of the goblin's fingers. He howled and rocked back onto his knees. She didn't hesitate to run the foul creature through.

Just in case others had heard the commotion, she left the room and went straight up the next set of steps she saw. Once she'd reached the next floor she tucked herself out of the way to clean the blade she'd gained. It wasn't a design she was used to, but at least she was no longer unarmed. After cleaning the sword with a tatter of cloth that was already partially hanging off her singed trousers, she set off again.

Now she knew how high she was, she resolved to try and go back down the next staircase and get to a level that was more likely to have an exit. Unfortunately, no sooner had she walked down the first three steps than she heard the sound of someone coming up. She had nowhere else to go except farther up the same staircase and onto the floor above that.

"Crapola," she muttered and carried on slinking away down yet another corridor. At this level she found herself forced back towards the mountain. The outside wall, the floors and the roof above had all been ripped apart by weather and time, and there was no telling how unstable the rock under her feet had become. Cracks ran through a lot of it and conjured up the image of the first main hall she had come across. She shuddered.

Either the number of goblins had increased or they were closing in on her position, because she had only been walking for another fifteen minutes when she heard more sounds ahead of her. She tucked into the stairwell of yet another twisting tower and peeked around the edge to see how many approached her.

When four goblins with bows wandered around the corner she pulled back. Four was two too many for her to want to attempt killing, especially when their ranged weapons gave them even more of an advantage. She peered downwards but couldn't see anything beyond the first few steps. There was no light of any kind getting in, and she suspected the tower had caved in somewhere because the stairwell above her was reasonably bright.

Again, she was forced to go up when she wanted to go down. So far none of the patrolling horde

seemed to have noticed her but, over the next hour or more, she found herself doubling back and being forced onto one route, always up and always towards the central section of the building.

It dawned on Aneira that the dragon must be around somewhere and, if anywhere, it was likely to be at the top, and probably somewhere dark. Her next thought made her want to kick herself, but she resisted while heading up some more steps.

The goblins had known the dragon was here. As she had run closer to the ruins the night before, they had all hung back. Now she knew what they had been afraid of. And given how she was being driven always up and towards the darker parts of the abandoned fortress, she bet they knew exactly where it lived, too.

So far she'd killed almost fifteen of the thirty-odd horde, and she knew it would make the remaining ones wary of her. Instead, they were getting the dragon to do their dirty work. They were going round in numbers too big for her to fight and making sure she had to keep retreating.

At first this made her so cross she considered hurling herself back downwards onto the four goblins behind her, but she knew anger was never a good decision maker. With a frown fixed on her face she went out onto the next landing.

There were few rooms on this floor that were still intact, and she had to head towards the mountain again. As she did she noticed that it got darker and the walls grew rougher. These had been carved out of the rock rather than made with stone that had been quarried out.

She could only see one set of steps other than the ones she'd left behind, and she dashed over to them. As she heard sounds of more goblins ascending from below she gritted her teeth and rushed upwards.

Only one option remained for her and, with her mind made up to take it, she kept going until she reached the top. She stifled a gasp as she emerged in a massive room, lit with torches as if she was expected. At the end of it, right in the heart of the mountain, was a large set of stairs that went up so high they towered above her and she couldn't see what was on the new level.

Knowing her pursuers would not be far behind her she started to scramble up them. Her eyes remained fixed ahead of her now. The dragon would be up here somewhere, and there was no way to tell where until he showed himself. She had a feeling his scales would blend in with the uneven stone, especially as the flickering light of the torches made it look like it was dragon scales itself.

A part of her wondered if this fortress had been made for the dragon but she dismissed the idea. Her parents had only ever told her that humans were killed by or killed dragons, and this place had been made by men.

As she reached the top of the massive stairway she realised it wasn't the end of the fortress by far. More archways led off in several different directions, and she took the most major, guessing the dragon had picked the most important place in the whole building to reside in.

After going through the arch she saw another set of stairs leading to a platform, and from that even more steps to both the left and the right, as well as some kind of open area set even further back. Scattered on the floor were dried dragon scales that had been shed from the creature's skin. Now she was in the dragon's domain.

Just in case it snuck up on her, she held the curved sword out ahead of her and slowed her pace again. Her eyes never stayed still but swept from side to side trying to pierce the shadows and check for any movement nearby.

Suddenly it was there at the end of the room. She took a few steps forward as it came towards her and lowered her blade to try and appear non-threatening. Their eyes met and she kept her sight fixed on its face, hoping to read any sudden movements there.

With no warning, it flicked its tail out and swept her up against the wall. She dropped her weapon and the dragon sent the sword flying off the platform with one of its front claws. She listened as it clattered down and down until it was out of earshot, having no idea what else to do but wait for the dragon to make its next move.

"I let you go once. Why do you disturb me again?"

Her mouth fell open as she heard the dragon's voice. It took her a moment to gather her wits about her and find her tongue.

"The goblins have given me no option. I am weaponless, my bow and arrows at the bottom of the lake. They have cut me off from every exit and have driven me up and up. I cannot kill all of them or you," she said, aware that he could crush her with the tail that still pinned her bodily to the wall.

"You run from them, instead of fighting?"

"I do. A small number of them I can pick off one by one, but there are too many. I am constantly forced to retreat. They will eventually kill me; I cannot keep my guard up forever. They will slit my throat while I sleep or put a knife in my back. And then eat me."

"I will do no less."

"I know."

"So why have you expended the energy to come all the way up here?"

"To look death in the face."

Aneira expected the end to come swiftly after this comment, but it didn't. Instead, the muscles in his tail relaxed and he swept it behind him again, leaving her standing and capable of movement. The shock must have been evident all over her face as she started to back up, because he didn't follow her but copied her movements, retreating backwards.

Their eyes remained fixed on each other until she noticed his gaze flick to her right. She rotated just in time to see four goblins fire arrows in her direction. She dived to the ground, letting them fly over her head and clatter into the wall. As they launched more of the projectiles at her, she spun to grab three off the floor and then dived behind a pillar.

With her heart already pounding in her chest, she tried to pinpoint the location of the goblins and figure out how to get closer whilst staying under cover. The dragon was nowhere to be seen. She saw a small ledge running around the back of one of the main stairways and figured it would go around the masonry to the back of the goblins' position.

Timing her movement to coincide with the goblins reloading, she sprinted across the gap and threw one of their arrows back as if it was a javelin. It caught one on the arm and injured it, but that's all she had time to see before she was cowering behind another rock. Wasting no time, she scurried to the ledge and started walking along it, one arrow in each hand. As she got to the end she gingerly turned her body around to face the wall and peeked around the corner.

One of the archers lay on its back, its body contorted strangely. She watched, mesmerised, as it died. Without waiting for the goblins to notice her, she launched another arrow at the nearest one and tucked back behind the stone. She heard a gargle as the second goblin joined the first in its death throes.

She scurried back along the ledge and to the edge of the steps. A shiver ran down her spine as she realised the arrow heads must have been poisoned. She had not thrown either with enough force to kill.

Both remaining goblins must have made her position as they rushed at her, yelling, from both sides. Thankfully the narrowness of the ledge slowed one down, enabling her to tackle the first and drive her remaining arrow right through its heart.

Pulling the bow from its hand and another arrow from its quiver, she turned and shot the final one just as he came around the corner. Then she collapsed into a sitting heap, her legs completely jelly-like. After a few moments to get her breath back and digest what she had just achieved, she went around the three corpses that hadn't fallen off the platform and collected all their remaining arrows into a quiver.

The goblin bow was smaller than she liked, but having it in her hand made her feel like herself again. Just as she was about to walk off, the dragon came back out from the shadows again.

"That was impressive."

"Thank you," she said and bobbed her head out of respect. It seemed this dragon was going to let her live.

"What's your name?"

"Aneira, my lord."

"Do you know what your name means?"

"No, my lord, I don't." His question took her by surprise but she had noticed the look of delight in his eye when she'd called him lord. He obviously appreciated the respect, and if it kept her alive it worked for her.

"Why are the goblins chasing you?"

"I was in a village, south-east of here, and it seems they have, or hopefully *had*, some agreement with the village. In return for regular sacrifices the goblins didn't decimate the entire village. I wanted to help them, as they helped me, so I tried to get an idea of their numbers and strength, but they caught me snooping around and tried to include me in the sacrifice. I killed as many as I could and fled to try and kill more another day."

"So you came here?"

"Had I known you were here, my lord, I would not have."

"Everyone knows I reside her."

"I'm sorry, my lord, I did not. I do not live nearby and no one told me. I thought all dragons were dead and a thing of the past." Her heart raced in her chest as she tried to figure out where his questions were leading. Until today she'd not even realised dragons still lived, let alone talked.

"Where are you from?"

"Originally, I do not know. My people have always wandered the mountains far south of here. I am looking for them."

"You are alone?"

"Yes, my people are gone. I don't know where. I search for them, but it's been eight years. There is little hope that I'll find them again."

"How did you lose them?"

"I can hardly remember exactly what happened. One day my mother woke me up and made me run with her to a cave near the place we had camped. She told me to stay there until she returned. I waited for hours but no one ever came back."

"They left you there?"

"Not deliberately, my lord; at least, I don't think it was deliberate. When I finally ventured out of the cave and went to the site of our camp, there was blood and a pile of burning bodies. Not enough to account for all my people, but many. I followed the rut of some wheels in the mud for several days, but after a few days of dry weather I lost the trail. I've been searching ever since."

"You do not settle anywhere?"

"No, my lord, nowhere has felt like home, like I belong."

For a while neither of them spoke, and she fidgeted slightly. Not knowing what he was thinking or planning to do kept her on edge.

"There is a way they don't know about. Come, follow me and I will show you," the dragon said and moved off to one side. With a raised eyebrow she did as he asked, letting the shadows hide both of them from sight. When they'd gone around a corner he paused for a moment, and a small glow started to emanate from his eyes, lighting the pathway for them both. She grinned. Having a dragon for an ally was proving useful, even if it might only be a temporary alliance.

The passage they were in twisted and turned before he darted off to the left, down a tunnel she hadn't noticed. At the top of a staircase carved into the rock he stopped and moved to the side.

"Go down there. Keep going east until you're led out onto a hillside, and continue wandering. I hope one day you find somewhere you belong."

"Thank you, my lord."

"I will deal with the goblins. It's been a while since I ate."

Before she could respond to his statement, he had turned and lumbered off into the darkness. She looked back at the black tunnel.

"Ummmm."

Suddenly the dragon snorted fire from somewhere behind her and a torch on the wall lit up. He then continued walking away. With an extra spring in her step, she jogged up and grabbed the light from the wall.

As she turned back to go down and out of the ruins, she realised she never found out if the



dragon had a name, or even said goodbye. It made her pause and look back up the way he'd led her but he was long gone and she didn't know what his patience would be like if she disturbed him for a third time.

Instead, she took the first step down and continued down for some time, winding around very slowly until she had lost all sense of direction. When she finally reached the bottom her legs ached and she yawned with tiredness. She found herself in another room, not unlike all the ones she'd passed through in the earlier hours. She suspected she was lower than the entrance level, however.

Up ahead there was a single archway which led to a long corridor. The torchlight flickered off the walls, and now she wasn't being chased by anything she took a moment to appreciate the beauty. This whole place had been designed to work with the light of flames and stars instead of sunlight, and it sparkled and gleamed as if part of its own dance that never ended while someone was there to see it.

If she had a home, she hoped that it would be something like this; where everything had been planned and night time was as beautiful as day, to be enjoyed, not hidden from. She'd seen too many villages where everyone hid inside their houses as soon as the sun went down. That luxury had never been one she had, and she'd come to appreciate being forced to walk during the night. The things she had seen had slowly changed her opinion of it. The moon and stars reflected back on a clear, still lake were breathtaking.

When she reached the end of the corridor she ground to a halt. Ahead of her was a chasm. At some point the earth had moved and opened up a deep rent in the rock. The way out was on the other side. A bridge had been made across it at some point but, just like everything else in this place, time and weather had got to it, and now it was gone, somewhere at the bottom of the gap it had straddled.

She sighed. This would be a problem. After placing the torch somewhere safe she tried to see if she could find another way across, or down and then up the other side. There was nothing.

Realising how tired she was she sat down and decided to take a break. It had been over two days since she had initially left the village, and apart from a brief period almost dead, she had been on the go since then.

Tackling those stairs and finding another way out could wait. The other plus to that would hopefully be the lack of the goblins. That dragon could kill pretty quickly.

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As the smell of the nearest goblins hit Cathal, he changed direction. He'd told Aneira they would be dealt with and there was no time like the present. Any creatures that had subjected humans to the atrocities she'd mentioned deserved to be wiped from existence, and it had been a while since he'd eaten.

The only thing he'd have to be careful about was their arrows. The goblins had shot poisoned ones at the poor woman several times, and poisons made him feel rough for several hours. In theory, if enough of it made its way to his blood stream it might even kill him, although he'd never had more than one dose at any point.

An hour later he'd barbecued over thirty of them and eaten more than he should in one go. It surprised him that Aneira had thought she could take on so many of them all by herself, although her short battle against the four he'd seen had been impressive; she was very resourceful.

While he was breathing fire on another set of unwary goblins, from a hole in the floor above them, he reached out with his mind to see what he could still sense in his domain. Instantly he felt her; she was making her way east far below him. He also felt the presence of another sixty or so goblins, including a much stronger one back near the large entrance where he'd first seen her.

He picked up the pace and headed to the leader. There were a lot more in the horde than she had given indication of. Reinforcements of some kind must have arrived, so there were still too many for the village to defeat alone. The last time he had flown nearby there had only been about twenty strong males, and he doubted many of them knew how to fight.

When he got near to the strongest life force he moved with more care. There was a mass of them hiding in the archway and he could smell the smoke of a fire they must have set. As soon as he

started on this bunch they would more than likely scatter.

Cathal headed up until he was near an open roof and flew out. It was day, so they would probably see him coming, but this would ensure they ran inside, under cover, allowing him to finish them off at his leisure.

He wheeled upwards as quietly as he could, folded his wings and plummeted down towards them. About two hundred metres high, he was spotted and the goblins started running. He exhaled, setting many of them alight and causing the rest to run inside, just as he'd hoped. As he pulled up, he heard the twang of bowstrings. He banked left but wasn't quick enough. An arrow caught him underneath one of his scales on his underside.

With a snarl he plunged again, and more flames spread across and through the entrance. More shrieks and yelps of pain caught his ears and he felt their life forces fade. A few still remained unharmed but they were running farther into the fortress. They would be easy to mop up now.

As soon as he landed he pulled the arrow out from where it had lodged. The wound bled a small amount but it would do him no long-term harm. Just in case, he sniffed the arrow head. The faint smell of Essence of Murdew. Not the first time he'd been poisoned with it. He would have a sore head for a while but would be fine. He didn't want to get hit with it again, however. It was not something he'd built up much of a resistance to.

Just as he expected, the leader had run and left his minions to fend for themselves, but he'd fled farther in and Cathal could sense him trying to work his way around the same ledge he'd first seen her on. He chuckled and snorted some more flames on a goblin he'd spotted out of the corner of his eye.

Several minutes later he came up on the great hall from the other side. This time he didn't hesitate and filled the place with fire. He gave it a few lungfulls, rather than only one, and then waited as the horde leader fell into the lake. This time there would be no rescue.

An hour later he had mopped up most of the other goblins. One or two remained, dotted here and there, but several had turned on each other while he had been making his rounds, and there were so few left they would not be able to threaten the village any longer.

If any came near him he would deal with them, but he had wandered the place long enough. Both his head and his stomach hurt, one from poison and the other from indigestion.

As he finished checking the final number of living goblins, he noticed Aneira was still beneath him, in the bottom level of the great fortress, and not moving. He stopped and waited to see if she moved after a few minutes but she didn't. This woman was proving to be problematic.

Feeling a little irritated by all these continued presences in his home he trudged back up to the top of the main section and went to the tunnel that led down to her. By the time he reached her level she was still there and as far as he could tell she hadn't moved an inch, nor was there any light source coming from up ahead. She was in the pitch black.

"You are still here," he said as he came up beside her. She sat on the ground with her knees up under her chin, looking a bit like a small child who was bored. As soon as she turned her head and saw him she leapt to her feet and did an awkward curtsy.

"Sorry, my lord. I was about to leave but I couldn't find a way to cross, and then my light went out."

"Do you not carry anything with you to light your way?" It was all he could do to keep his anger out of his voice. Why were women so ill-prepared?

"I do, but it got rather wet when I took a swim in your lake."

"Ah." He could have hit himself. That was his fault. As he looked out over the chasm he realised she was right. The bridge that had been there five days ago had gone. It must have fallen while he was out hunting somewhere. If it had given way while he was there the noise would have reached his ears. There was no way she could have crossed.

For a moment he considered leading her back up and out another way but as he looked back at her he knew that would be unkind. From her aura he could tell she was already exhausted and it was not a short journey back to the village, without having to go right to the top of the fortress just to come down again.

“Climb up on my back, I will fly you over,” he said, his words surprising himself.

“My lord? Ride a dragon? Me?”

He chuckled at her wide eyes. After a moment she recovered from her shock and very gently climbed up his folded leg onto the scales of his back. The feeling of her soft padded feet tickled him a little but he ignored it. As soon as she was settled with one leg either side of his back ridge and holding on with both hands, he spread his wings and leapt off the ledge.

Within moments he was on the other side and she slid off his back onto the floor.

“Wow, thank you. That was...” her voice trailed off and she shook her head. It made him grin.

“You should go first. Some of these passages are a tight fit and I block all light getting through them. You would be left to stumble behind in the dark.”

She nodded her acknowledgement of his words and started walking down the inclined pathway. The farther they went, the rougher the walls and floor grew, until the tunnel was no longer manmade, but natural.

“Did you... Was it you who healed me and moved me somewhere safer?” she said, breaking their silence.

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome, but I did cause you the damage that I fixed. I thought you were here to try and kill me.”

“I didn't even know dragons were real, let alone that one still existed.”

“I think I might be the last.”

“Just like I'm the last of my people.”

“Yes.” Despite the sadness of this sentiment, he smiled. There was something about this woman he liked.

His thoughts were suddenly distracted by the tunnel narrowing and he sucked in his stomach to wriggle through the gap. They lapsed into silence again but this time it didn't feel uncomfortable. It was the silence of companions who had said everything they needed for the time being and could just 'be' together.

Light soon shone up ahead and he walked out into the day with her. They were just past the foot of the mountains and a mile or so from the black stone giant they had been in moments before. The day was already waning and it would be dark before she got to the village.

“I have dealt with the majority of the goblin horde, over seventy of them dead.”

“That many? I was only followed in by about twenty. I'd already killed over ten!” she said and raised her eyebrows.

“That would explain why you thought you could save the village. I can believe you would have challenged thirty, but not over a hundred.”

“No, I'd have run and never looked back had I known that many lingered here. No wonder the village could not save themselves.”

“I think there are only about ten more, but most of them were lost alone or in pairs in my fortress. I will eat them when I can stomach some more.” His statement made her giggle.

“Thank you, for all your help. I will let the village know what you have done for them.”

“No! You must promise not to mention me to the village, or ever let anyone know of this entrance to my domain.” He snapped his response and regretted it straight away. She had meant no harm. “Most humans see me as a beast and try to have me killed. I just wish to live the rest of my life in peace.”

“I understand... I won't tell them.”

“Thank you.” He nodded his head at her and turned to go.

“What do I tell them? They will want to know how they are safe.”

“Tell them you killed the thirty that chased you. Had I not interfered you might have managed that much.”

“Well then, good bye.” She smiled, waved and started walking. He watched her for a moment before retreating from the daylight back into his lair.

As he reached the room he normally slept in he expected to feel relieved that everything was back to normal in his part of the world, but he felt like there was a hole, like something was missing. Despite that, he settled his sore head down on his front legs and closed his eyes.

## **Home is Where the Heart is**

Aneira's feet hurt. She'd been on the go with little rest for over two days and there was still more to do. The village was another mile away and night had already fallen. Her thoughts had mostly been on the dragon though. She realised she still didn't even know if he had a name.

If she didn't have the burns on her clothes to prove it, she would have wondered if the last few days had actually been a dream. Meeting a dragon was one of the most epic things that had ever happened to her, and she had just promised never to tell anyone. It made her feel even more alone. Not only was she the only one of her people left but she couldn't even tell anyone the most important thing that had ever happened to her.

When she reached the outskirts of the settlement she stopped for a moment. Everything was shut up again, and she wasn't sure where to go to let them know they were free from the goblins. She walked to the well in the centre and stood there for a moment. As she pivoted around she noticed a light spilling under the edge of the tavern's door.

If she could have picked anywhere, the tavern would have been her choice, so she ran up and knocked. A minute later Merrion opened the door to her.

"Aneira! We didn't expect to ever see you again, no, we didn't."

"Well, I'm back and the goblins are gone."

"Gone? As in not comin' back?"

"As in dead. There might be one or two roaming around but the horde and its leader are dead." She smiled as his mouth fell open. Suddenly his wife appeared behind him and nudged him aside to get a look at her.

"Come in outta that cold night air." She flapped like a mother hen and ushered Aneira into the warm room. No one else was there, but it was already late enough that they might have just gone to their homes a little early.

"I'll let the chief know. He'll want to speak to you 'bout it, I'm sure." Merrion walked out the door and closed it behind him, leaving her standing awkwardly in the middle of the room.

"You liked my pie, didn't you, young'un?"

She nodded enthusiastically, hoping this meant she was about to get fed.

"Well sit yourself down then, you're making the place look untidy."

Two minutes later she was sat at the same table as three days earlier, eating some more pie, mash and veg, covered in steaming gravy.

Before she could finish, Merrion returned with the village's chief. The slightly chubby man came and sat down in front of her.

"Is it true?" She nodded and carried on shovelling her mouth full of food. "You must be a pretty fine warrior?"

She still didn't answer but shrugged. No part of her really wanted to come out and say the lie the dragon had asked her to. While she continued eating the chief looked her over, and by the time she had finished her food she felt like she wanted to crawl out of her own skin and hide.

"How old are you, Aneira?"

"I don't know, but I think around eighteen. I'm not sure exactly. I can't remember when my birthday is."

"Have you thought o' settlin' down somewhere? O' course you have, that's a dumb question, ain't it? I think you should stick 'round here, Aneira. You're old enough t'be some man's wife, and you've got lots t'recommend you."

Somehow, she wasn't sure this was a good thing, but the chief had a look in his eyes that made her keep quiet.

"Now, I'd best go tell everyone the good news, especially those five young'uns who are waitin' to be sacrificed. Thanks to you they can go back 'ome tonight."

She smiled as he got up and left, but it was only out of politeness. As soon as the door was shut Heulwen came over to her and patted her hand.

"How 'bout we get you into somethin' a little less tatty? The chief has his eye on you and I don't think a girl like you could make a better match. He's one fine man."

Before she could protest to these ideas the woman had rushed off up the stairs. Her stomach turned at the thought of marrying someone like their chief. For starters, he was a good bit older than her, and he just wasn't the sort of man she'd ever dreamt of marrying. Not that she'd really ever dreamt of marrying anyone, but if she had, it wouldn't have been him.

She knew she had to get out of there as quickly as possible.

"Merrion. Could I have some more pie please?" she said as she pushed the plate towards him and gave him her biggest smile.

"O' course you can."

As soon as he'd left the room she got up, grabbed all her stuff and bolted out of the door. Without looking back, she ran into the night, up towards the mountains, and didn't slow down until she was over a mile away.

"That was a close thing," she said out into the night and walked onwards.

As dawn was breaking she saw a rabbit up ahead. Like lightning she notched an arrow to her bow and very little time later the animal was knocked onto its side, the same arrow right through its skull.

As she fetched it, she felt the first few patters of rain, and it wasn't long before the heavens opened. Within minutes she was drenched and could think of only one place to stay dry. She jogged towards the main entrance of the ruined fortress and ducked under the first archway. Already there were the remains of a fire, and her tinder had dried out enough since her swim in the lake that she managed to get a spark.

With a small blaze going she prepared her rabbit to cook. Even if she didn't eat it just yet, it would keep better cooked than raw.

She'd just suspended the carcass over the flames and sat down with her back against a dry wall when she felt her eyelids droop. After two nights of no sleep she was powerless to stop herself drifting off.

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Cathal sniffed as he woke up. Someone had lit a fire. He closed his eyes again and searched for the culprit with his mind. Suddenly his eyes snapped open. Aneira! He got to his feet and ran down towards her as fast as he could, not slowing until he was just about to come across her.

When he walked into the room she occupied he noticed she was drifting off. She still seemed just as tired as she had when she'd left to go to the village, and he found he had very mixed feelings over her being there. He hoped nothing had happened to force her to resume wandering, but he was glad she'd stopped by again.

"That smells good," he said. He watched her jolt out of her doze and swivel to face him. She visibly relaxed when she noticed it was him.

"I'm sorry, my lord. I didn't think me and my little fire would bother you all the way out here. I only came in to escape the rain."

"You didn't think the village a safer option?"

"No, my lord. They wanted to marry me off to their greatest warrior. I think it had something to do with them thinking I killed a bunch of goblins, and that being good for strong children."

"You said no?"

"I wasn't sure I was going to get the option to say no. I more, snuck off to avoid my fate."

He laughed at the face she pulled while she grinned and fidgeted a little under his gaze.

"So you chose here."

"I'm sorry, my lord. I can go. I really didn't mean to disturb you."

"No. Stay. I know it's my home... well, it's not really a home, more of a ruin, but you're welcome

to keep dry in it. Eat and get some rest. You didn't sleep last night. I'll keep a watch."

"Thank you. I am tired, very tired."

He curled up, blocking the entrance and ensuring the light of her fire wouldn't attract any unwelcome visitors. She finished cooking, and even offered him some of her meal, but he declined. The goblins he'd consumed earlier had more than filled him up, although they weren't as wholesome as the rabbit she'd got on a spit.

Many hours later she woke up again. He'd had to rescue her meat for her and stop it burning to a crisp, but even then he'd not had the heart to wake her.

As she yawned and stretched he also got up and paced to and fro for a moment to ease his stiffened limbs.

"Thank you yet again, my lord. I've not slept that well in months."

"You're welcome, but please, my name is Cathal."

"Cathal, I like that. It sounds like a good name for a dragon."

"Perhaps, but Aneira would be a good name for a dragon, I think, too."

"Really? I'm not sure if it's noble enough."

He almost chuckled aloud at the delight in her face, despite her words.

"I asked you if you knew what your name meant when you told it to me. I do know what it means, and I knew then. It means golden. And dragons, well... we have a sort of weakness for gold. As such, I have an offer for you."

"An offer? For me?"

"Yes. You know I healed you but, as a dragon, I can do many other wonderful things, including give another animal or creature, or human, the gift of becoming like me."

"I don't understand."

"If you wish, I can turn you into a dragon and you can stay here, with me, forever?"

"Really? I could have a home?"

"If you want, yes."

Tears sprang to her eyes and she choked up, unable to reply to him. He wasn't sure whether this meant yes or no, so he sat and waited for her to calm herself down again.

"Do you want to stay?" he asked when he could wait no longer.

She nodded her head vigorously. "Yes, please. I'd love to stay with you here."

"I know it's not much; most of it's a ruin."

"It's amazing, and it's perfect, and then neither of us would be alone anymore."

"No, and neither of us would be the last of our kind."

~

Thank you for reading the first tale of Ethanar, Wandering to Belong. If you enjoyed this story and would like to read more you can find the second tale of Ethanar, Innocent Hearts, [here](#). If you would like to view the full list of Ethanar tales in the order they should be read, the order they were published, or the order they occur chronologically, you can find them [here](#). If you would like to subscribe to the new release email to be notified when the next tale of Ethanar is ready you can do so [here](#). For a complete list of all works by the author, separated by genre, please continue. If you have enjoyed the book you just read and would like to let the author know you can email her via [books@jessmountifield.co.uk](mailto:books@jessmountifield.co.uk) or alternatively leave a review at your place of purchase.

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**About the Author**

Jess was born in the quaint village of Woodbridge in the UK, has spent some of her childhood in the States and now resides in the beautiful Roman city of Bath. She lives with her husband, Phil, and her very dapsy cat, Pleaides.

During her still relatively short life Jess has displayed an innate curiosity for learning new things and has therefore studied many subjects, from maths and the sciences, to history and drama. Jess now works full time as a writer, incorporating many of the subjects she has an interest in within her plots and characters.

When she's not working she can often be found with friends, enjoying a vast array of films, ice skating or trekking all over the English countryside.

You can find out more about the author and her upcoming projects by following her on [twitter](#) or

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