

Chapter One

As long as I kept my mouth shut, I could pass for a vampire. So I gave the unicorns passing me only a tight-lipped smile. As far as I was aware, unicorns had nothing against humans. But not all of the citizens of Lloegyr were that happy with my kind. Dragons, in particular, still remembered the days when knights had crossed over from Earth and attacked them with lances.

The grey clouds drifted apart, allowing a shaft of sunshine to touch on the colourful tents stretched across the muddy field. I slumped my shoulders, although the warmth was welcome. December in this part of Lloegyr was warmer than what I had come from in Northamptonshire, but I was still wishing that I'd brought a fleece to wear under my coat.

A purple-grey streak was my only warning. A moment later, Morey had landed on my left shoulder. Falcon and cat claws pressed through to my skin and I winced. 'Careful,' I told the gryphon. 'This coat is still new.'

'Why are you hunched over?' he demanded in return. He made his way down past my elbow. His body was only slightly longer than my forearm. 'It's making it hard to balance.'

'I know that vampires can go out in daylight,' I said. 'But sunshine still saps their strength, doesn't it? I was trying to keep in role.'

Morey's red-brown eyes met mine. 'Find something else to do, but straighten your shoulders.'

'These shoulders were mine,' I reminded him, 'long before you came on the scene.'

His sharp yellow beak stabbed at me. 'You were invited here by the Archdeacon of Ocheham herself. Your safety is guaranteed, and by a unicorn, no less.'

My gaze drifted over to a group of elves, standing tall in their uniforms of blue and black. 'If it's so safe, why are the police here?'

Morey snorted. 'The *heddlu* always have a presence at the Eisteddfod. Some people always drink too much. Usually the harpies. And some of the dragons.'

My arm was getting tired under his weight, light as he was. 'Okay, I'll straighten. If you'll go back up.'

'If you'll buy me an ale.'

'Certainly.'

His tail was a warm comfort around my neck as I took us across to one of the refreshment tents. The coinage of Lloegyr, silver and gold, was a heavy weight in my trouser pocket. I took a seat at the wooden bar, and Morey hopped down to take a place at my elbow. 'The dark,' he told me. 'Bragdy Mŵs Piws. Best brewery in Lloegyr.'

I ordered a pint for me and a half pint for Morey. His cat ears drew back, expressing his displeasure at the smaller wooden tankard. 'I don't want you sliding off my shoulder later,' I told him.

'As if.'

I grinned. 'Your English is really coming on.'

He studied me over his beer. 'And how's your Welsh?'

Fortunately, the bartender's request for payment meant I could ignore the question. I slid two silver coins across the bar. 'Yes, from James,' I said at Morey's glance. 'Although he was miffed at not coming along.'

‘Your brother wasn’t invited.’

The bartender handed me several copper coins in change. As she turned away, her human features blurred into the brown fur and grey muzzle of a wolf. I lowered my eyes. Looking at weres always gave me a headache.

The tent was rather empty. A dragon was seated near the entrance, a bucket of beer at his red-scaled feet. A gold band circled one foreleg, the bright material studded with jewels. ‘Morey,’ I asked quietly, ‘can you work out which family he belongs to?’

The gryphon studied the patterns swirling across the band. ‘Don’t worry, he’s not Inkeri.’

I forced myself to relax. ‘I shouldn’t think any of that dragon family would be very happy with me.’

‘Not once you’ve testified against their Matriarch, no.’ Morey nudged my arm with his beak. ‘But once she’s been convicted and paid the *wergild*, all honour will be satisfied. You won’t need to worry about those dragons again.’

‘What’s *wergild*?’

But a crier was charging past the tent, her silver hooves throwing mud into the air. ‘*Pafiliwn, unawd mezzo-soprano dros 40 oed. Pafiliwn, unawd mezzo-soprano dros 40 oed,*’ the unicorn whinnied, her silver horn flashing. ‘*Pafiliwn, unawd mezzo-soprano dros 40 oed.*’

‘Drink up,’ Morey urged me. ‘We need to go to the Pavilion.’

‘To hear someone sing?’

‘Not just anyone.’ His feathers fluffed. ‘A friend of mine.’

Morey had only invaded my life five months ago, but I had quickly learned to read his body language. For some reason, he was embarrassed. Did he expect me to mock him? This was worth abandoning a pint. Or, actually, just drinking it down quickly. I gulped down the dark ale with some regret, as the rich malt deserved much closer attention.

I trudged out into the weak sunshine, Morey once again in his usual place on my left shoulder. My wellies squelched in the sodden ground as I made my way past the food tents and across to the massive red-orange tent of the Pavilion. I joined a throng of other beings headed in the same direction. A were-bear was lumbering on my left, several vampires were on my right, and I had to slow down to avoid stepping on the blue tail of the dragon ahead of me. A pungent whiff of old sweat and urine warned me that a harpy was flying overhead.

My boots clunked against wooden planks as we entered the Pavilion. There was a welcome increase in temperature, but an unwelcome increase in stench. I tried to edge away from a group of harpies and looked around for a dragon. I relished the wood smoke and grass smell of dragons.

‘Greetings.’ The Archdeacon of Ocheham was at my right, the black cowl of her own holy orders lying around her grey-white neck. She lowered her head to me. Unicorn smell was similar to that of a freshly groomed horse, and I took in a deep breath. ‘Enjoying the Eisteddfod, Father Penny?’

‘Yes, Archdeacon.’ As ever, I had to bite back the comment that I was a woman, not a man. But addressing all priests with the masculine title seemed to be the practice in Lloegyr. And perhaps unicorns, dragons, and so on thought that all humans looked alike?

‘What do you think of our banner?’

I looked up at the raised stage. Now I saw that one of the sponsors of the Eisteddfod was *Eglwys Loegyr*, the Church of Lloegyr. The gold design of St George was bright against the red background. ‘It’s beautiful.’

‘Do you still wear the saint’s relic?’

I touched my shirt and felt the medal underneath. It lay just below the obsidian Celtic cross, which Raven had carved for me, using his flame to engrave the pattern. ‘All the time.’

But I was also staring at the mounted knight whose lance was piercing the side of the saint. Because, in Lloegyr, the martyr was the dragon, and the evil murderer was the human. Once again I made certain that my lips were hiding my lack of sharp canines.

‘We sponsor the Eisteddfod,’ the Archdeacon explained, ‘as an occasion which brings together the different races in peaceful pursuits. Does the Church of England provide anything similar?’

‘We try to reach out to other faith communities. My bishop has arranged for me to join the local interfaith network.’

A unicorn stepped onto the stage, and conversations in the tent stilled. ‘*Cystadleuaeth y mezzo soprano yn dechrau,*’ he announced. And I sighed inwardly. It would be in Welsh. Of course. Many denizens of Lloegyr spoke some English, but Welsh was their national language.

The unicorn was joined by another two of his species on the left of the stage. All three wore torcs of silver and gold, and flowers had been woven into their white manes. ‘Are they the judges?’ I asked Morey.

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘Everyone knows that unicorn judges can be trusted. They are absolutely unbiased.’

‘Unicorns are trusted throughout Lloegyr,’ the Archdeacon agreed. ‘No one would ever question the integrity of a unicorn.’

Then the first competition entrant was bending the stage under his weight. The dragon had the green-black scales of a sea dragon, and for a moment my heart fluttered. But as he bowed to the judges I saw that he was too small to be Raven. He was only the size of a large horse, and his hide had none of the iridescence which made Raven the most beautiful dragon I’d ever seen.

‘Asger Eirasson,’ the dragon said, introducing himself. ‘*Canaf y "yr Alarnad i Golled"*.’

The jaws opened wider, exposing sharp teeth and a blue tongue. I was prepared to compare his voice unfavourably to Raven’s. But whereas Raven had a soprano voice, Asger sang in a slightly lower register. I couldn’t understand the words, but the tune was beautiful and I had to restrain myself from clapping when he’d finished.

The next entrant was an elf. The only elves I’d met thus far were police officers, so I found her green outfit a nice contrast to the militaristic uniforms worn by the *heddlu*. The gold trim reminded me how plainly I was dressed, blue coat over grey clerical shirt and black trousers. And green wellington boots. I brushed back my shoulder length brown hair, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

After the elf’s song, which I decided had not reached the standard set by Asger, a unicorn trod onto the stage. Then another elf, and a vampire. The strong ale had gone to my head, which was causing the musical numbers to blur in my ears. And I was beginning to worry about what I would do when the beer dropped down to my bladder. I hadn’t thought to enquire, when accepting the invitation from the Archdeacon, to ask whether the Eisteddfod would have toilet facilities compatible with human anatomy.

There was a pause while an elf brought a padded stool onto the stage. Morey, who had been draped across my shoulder, now rose to his feet. His tension vibrated down his legs and into my arm.

I was about to say something to him when I saw the reason for his interest. A gryphon landed elegantly onto the stool. She tucked her cheetah hindlegs under her belly, and gripped the padding with her falcon forelegs. The peregrine head turned towards the judges. 'Taryn,' she told them. '*A byddafyn canu "Cwm Rhondda"*.'

As soon as she began, I knew we were hearing the winner. The purity of her voice surpassed even the search dragon's. Morey relaxed and began to purr in pleasure. I turned my head to hide a smile. True, we'd only re-interred Seren's body a few weeks ago, but his wife had been dead for several years. I knew that Taryn was attracted to Morey. Perhaps my Associate was beginning to return the interest.

Five more singers appeared after Taryn. The only one which made me wince was the harpy. Her voice was as rough as the filthy feathers of her wings. The dark hair straggled around her pale eyes, and her almost human face seemed to leer at the audience.

There was a short pause while the judges conferred quietly amongst themselves. When Taryn's name was called out for first prize, Morey roared his approval. And I gritted my teeth, certain that one of his foreclaws had dug through coat and shirt and pierced my skin.

A moment later he had launched himself into the air to fly over to her. I slipped a hand under my shirt and checked the damage. No blood. Once again I contemplated turning back the fashion clock and wearing shirts with shoulder pads.

A horsey chuckle brought my attention to the Archdeacon. Her brown eyes were glinting with amusement. 'You're very tolerant of your Associate.'

'Well,' I said, 'sometimes it's the other way 'round.'

'I had my doubts when Bishop Aeron suggested that he be your partner,' the unicorn continued. 'I remember well how angry he was when he felt forced to resign from the priesthood. I feared that he would resent a placement with a human priest. But I see that you two have forged a strong bond.'

'We've been through a lot,' I admitted. 'Dealing with Dominic's poisoning, finding out that Seren had been poisoned as well, rescuing James from the Inkeri longhouse--'

'And you helped to retrieve him from a harpy bar.'

My lips thinned. 'Bishop Aeron told you?'

The Archdeacon shook her head. 'No. A harpy. Bishop Aeron would not break trust with one of her flock. Father Penny, are you unwell?'

I stopped rubbing my forehead. 'I drank rather strong ale rather too quickly.'

'May I?' She turned slightly, bringing her head closer to mine. I held still as she brought her horn to gently touch my right cheek. The silver was cool against my skin, and I felt a flush spread through my body. The thickness in my head eased.

'Thank you,' I said sincerely, although part of me longed to ask her if she could do anything about full bladders.

'Unicorns have always been healers,' she said gently. 'You'll also find that your right knee will no longer trouble you.'

Perhaps not, but a moment later I had sharp claws once again digging into my shoulder. I gritted my teeth and held up my right arm so that Taryn could also make a landing. She was larger than Morey, and my muscles immediately raised a complaint. 'First prize,' Morey was saying excitedly. 'She's won first prize, and it's the first time she's ever appeared in the Eisteddfod. First prize!'

'Inspector Taryn,' said the Archdeacon, 'I would be honoured if you would grace my back with your presence.'

The gryphon dipped her head, and hopped over the unicorn. 'I have a good vocal instructor,' Taryn said in her fierce voice. 'I must go tell him of our success.'

'He's not here?' I asked.

'He's waiting for me in a beer tent.' Taryn whistled a laugh. 'Roryn said the suspense would be too much for him. Shall we go together, Trahaearneifion?'

Taryn said Morey's Welsh name with an ease I'd never been able to manage, despite my many attempts. My Associate shook his head. 'He should hear it from you first. Tell me which brewer, and I'll join you in a moment.'

'Cwrw Cader,' she said. And then she was gone, winging her way out of the tent.

Morey sighed. 'Pity she won't be in the final.'

'Why not?' I asked.

'It's tomorrow. Sunday, the Lord's Day.'

I smiled. 'I'm sure God wouldn't mind.'

Now his feathers were huffed in disapproval. 'The Sabbath is sacred. She's already given her regrets to the judges.'

The Archdeacon studied him. 'I was unaware that Inspector Taryn is a Christian.'

'She's only recently come to faith.'

'Through you, Morey?' The Archdeacon's first language was English, and I was relieved that she also found my Associate's Welsh name too difficult to pronounce.

'I took her down the Roman Road. There's no better way to introduce someone to the plan of salvation through Jesus Christ.'

I found myself biting my lower lip. Fortunately, the Archdeacon was far more tactful than I would have been. 'Yes, an evangelistic tool which has often been used to great success. I trust she has found a church in which her faith can be nurtured?'

'Of course.' Morey gave her a bow. 'And now, Archdeacon, will you excuse me? I'd like to go meet Taryn's instructor.'

I put my hand into my pocket and pulled out a gold coin. 'Here you are. Buy everyone a round.'

Morey grasped the coin in his beak. Then he took off, and I watched him loop out of the tent.

The Archdeacon's sigh brought my eyes back to the unicorn. 'I sometimes forget how conservative Elder Morey is.'

'I don't,' I said grimly. 'We've had more arguments over scripture than, well, than over the way he's hunting the local blue tits to extinction.'

'There was a time when he was more liberal.'

'He had to be,' I pointed out, 'to be married to a were-fox.'

'Indeed.' The Archdeacon stamped a forehoof against the ground. 'But his heart is sound. Shall we seek out some refreshments of our own? I quite fancy a cup of tea.'

The unicorn turned in one fluid movement and headed out of the Pavilion. I followed in her wake, struck by the way in which the crowd parted before her. As we squelched our way across the field, no matter what the species, the beings of Lloegyr ducked to one side to give the Archdeacon clear passage. Even the dragons dipped their heads in respect.

I felt out of place in the tea tent chosen by the Archdeacon. Artificial turf had been placed on the ground, light from gas lamps was refracted through crystal chandeliers, and the pink sofas sparkled with gold brocade. The immaculate unicorn looked at home among the silver curtains lining the tent sides. I sat down on one of the elaborately carved chairs and wished that I'd had time to brush my hair.

The tea was served in pure white china, a cup for me and a bowl for the Archdeacon. No milk was offered. The flavour was delicate and made me think of sunshine and flowers. 'What is it?' I asked.

'*Blodeuwedd*. A very special mixture.'

Then even the soft murmurs of conversations in the tent suddenly stilled. I followed the Archdeacon's gaze. Another unicorn stood in the entrance. She was several hands higher than my drinking companion, and her coat was more silver than white. A torc of twisted gold hung around her neck, and the terminals held large red stones. A circlet of gold surrounded the silver horn which spiralled from her forehead.

There was a flurry of movement. Nearly every being in the tent rose to their feet and bent their heads. Even the Archdeacon gave a respectful nod. I hurried to stand as well and gave a quick bow.

'*Ymlaciwch*,' the unicorn said regally. '*Mae pawb yn gyfartal yn yr Eisteddfod*.'

The Archdeacon shifted around our table. 'Archdruid, we would be honoured if you would join us.'

I sank back into my chair. With two unicorns standing across from me, I felt more dowdy than ever. *You're only thirty-six*, I told myself firmly, *and not a grey hair in sight*. But I still raised a hand to push stray strands back behind my ears.

Another bowl of tea was brought over. The Archdruid's dark eyes studied me. 'And you are not what you seem, *offeiriad*.'

'What do I seem to be?' I asked.

'You bear a form similar to a vampire, but I sense no fresh blood upon you.'

'The Father,' the Archdeacon said quietly, 'is the Vicar General of Incursions from Nenehampton Diocese, the sister diocese to Llanbedr on their world, which they call Earth.'

'Ah, a *dynol*.' The Archdruid winked at me. 'I bear no animosity towards humans.'

'I'm quite relieved to hear it,' I said. The silver horn looked lethal. 'My name is Penny White.'

The unicorn sighed. 'I thank you for the trust of your name. But I regret that I cannot offer you mine in return. Unicorns offer their names to very few. I don't expect you to understand.'

'In the second creation story in our holy book, the Bible,' I told her, 'God brings each animal to Adam, the first human, to give them their names. Later, when God appears to Moses in the burning bush, God refuses to give Moses his name. "I am who I am," God tells him. To be able to name someone is to have power over them. I understand that.'

The Archdruid brought her muzzle close to my ear. 'Well answered, Father. Always take care what you name. They are afterwards forever in your care.'

She dipped her muzzle into her tea, taking care not to wet her long beard. A few delicate sips, and then she raised her head again and headed back out into the weak sunshine. A half dozen drinkers abandoned their places and hurried after her.

'It's time I was going,' I told the Archdeacon. 'I need to finish off my sermon for Sunday.'

'Certainly.'

We extricated Morey from the beer tent. His flying was erratic, and he clung to my coat with exaggerated care. 'How many have you had?' I asked him.

'Just a couple of pints.' His speech was slurred. 'Had to celebrate Taryn's win, didn't I?'

'Just don't be sick on me.'

'I know, I know, it's a new coat.'

The unicorn tactfully ignored our conversation as she escorted us across the field and to the forest beyond. I felt the usual chill as we approached the thin place. ‘Many thanks, Archdeacon, for the invitation. It’s been an interesting day. Wouldn’t have minded a little less mud, though.’

‘*Nid Eisteddfod Eisteddfod heb fwd.* An Eisteddfod without mud is no Eisteddfod at all.’ The unicorn dipped her head. ‘God’s blessing on you, Father Penny.’

I gritted my teeth and walked forward. Despite the many times I’d already crossed over to Lloegyr, the sense of doom and death still threatened to overwhelm me. I had to force my feet to carry me into the darkness which howled and swirled around my body. Ice twisted through my hair, and I lost the sound of my heartbeat.

Then I was stumbling out into the rain of a cold December day in England. I didn’t need Morey’s urging to pull free from the yew tree which grew over the thin place on this side of the crossing. I hurried down the wet road to my car. Time to go home, make a cup of tea, and turn my attention away from unicorns and dragons and back to the more ordinary life of a parish priest.

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