

# **THE DRAGON THRONE**

## **The Four Kingdoms Book One**

By Chrys Cymri

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*Dedication*

*For my sister, Heidi*

*My first travelling companion...*

## CHAPTER ONE

Fianna dropped a final portion of straw on the stable floor. Resting a moment on her pitchfork, she wiped a grimy sleeve across her sweaty forehead. The smell of horse dung seemed to cling to her very skin, and she studied the stalls left between her and the main doors. Four more to muck out. Her muscles ached already. Taking a deep breath, she moved on.

‘My lady.’ Ern, the stablemaster, suddenly stepped in front of her.

Fianna straightened. She was tall for her eleven years, but still had to tip back her head to look him in the eye. ‘You’ve told me, in here, I’m Fianna.’

‘Not today, Your Highness.’ He gently but firmly removed the wooden handle from her grasp. ‘I haven’t forgotten the grief of fourteen months’ standing. Today is your mother’s death day.’

‘I didn’t forget,’ she told him bitterly. ‘Please let me work.’

‘You should be with the King--’

‘My father hardly ever knows when I’m gone.’ The words hung in the warm air. Fianna turned her head, regretting the outburst. A princess did not speak that way of the man who was her ruler as well as her sire.

‘Aye, lass, I know.’ Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ern reach out, then drop his hand away before it could touch her. ‘It has been but a year. He might now change.’

And the dragons might come down from the Sacred Mountains and sit one of their own upon the Throne. Fianna winced at the saying. It had been one of her mother’s favourites. ‘You’re right. I’d better go.’

‘I’ll get Jeremy to finish here.’

Fianna nodded. She glanced at the last stall. ‘Tell him Midnight likes to sleep in the right corner. I always put extra straw there for him.’

‘Aye, my lady.’

The shower rooms were empty. Most of the pages were still at their duties, cleaning stalls, repairing tack, training the dogs, the multiple tasks which young nobility were expected to undertake in their earliest service to the King. Fianna stripped off her dusty clothes, dropped them into the communal barrel, and stepped into a hot jet of water. A child of the royal family, she had discovered when she had first come to the stables just under a year ago, was expected to keep to the lighter duties in the castle itself. Carrying messages, greeting visitors, serving the King.

Fianna slicked back her long hair. She liked the stables, the kennels. Animals were often better than people when you wanted to someone to talk to. Midnight was one of her favourites. The gelding always nuzzled her in greeting, and never minded if she left tears in his mane.

Once she’d rinsed, she had no excuse to delay any longer. Fianna reluctantly left the shower, grabbing a towel as she stepped into the next room. Heat rose from the floor, drying her skin as she scrubbed her scalp with the towel. As usual, it took longest to convince a brush to tame her mass of hair. She was convinced that a curry comb would work best, but she couldn’t see Ern agreeing to let her use one for such a purpose. And the tell tale strands of red she’d leave behind would give her away.

Beyond the drying room was the dressing area. Fianna opened the wooden door to her own wardrobe. Fortunately she had one set of court silks still unworn. They’d only been sewn for her a month ago, so they’d still fit. She slipped the trousers over clean undergarments, tucked the shirt into the waist before tightening the belt. Dark

green and black. Not the royal colours, but the red badge was in its place above her left breast. A golden bar across the top, cutting across the golden wings of the dragon, marking her as heir to the Dragon Throne.

Fianna laced up her boots, then stared out the window. A wind was playing with remnants of snow, swirling white flakes across the cobblestones. The entrance to Secondus castle was several hundred feet away, and Fianna was tempted to use the underground passage from stables to pages' quarters. She put the thought aside. It would not do for the King's daughter to be seen entering the castle from the servants' halls.

Gritting her teeth, she made her way across the courtyard to the main entrance. The chill stripped the last of the shower's warmth from her body, and she was grateful for the mulled wine warming over a brazier just inside the thick doors. She ignored the guards' respectful salutes as she dipped a mug into the spicy liquid.

'Your Highness.' Fianna was unable to stop the grimace at Bernard's low voice. 'Your sire will meet you in the Queen's apartments.'

A Queen must be able to hide her emotions from public view. Her father's advice helped her to swallow her dislike of the Court Recorder, assisted by a helping of mulled wine. 'All right, I'm going.'

Fianna had occasionally heard guests to the castle complain at its size. Since she'd grown up in it, she couldn't understand how they got lost down the rambling corridors, or wandered into the wrong wings. Her father knew it even better than she did. He had always won their games of hide and seek. Back in the days when they had played games together.

Her mother's apartments were on the third level of the north wing. Fianna stopped outside the painted door, automatically checking her clothes, her hair. The seal had only been broken today. The edges of the plaster were rough. She laid a hand on the wood, then pushed it open.

The dust of a year's neglect stirred at her entrance. Fianna shut the door behind her, then stood in the gloom, remembering other times. Her mother had never been strong, and had spent much of her time in her rooms. But they had been happy, the three of them. In the evenings, Fianna and her father had often come here for games and tales. A game board still stood by one grey window, the players ready. And a book rested on a bed-side table, next to the chair where her father had often sat, holding the hand of her mother as she laughed at his gentle teasing.

But last year the winter had been long and harsh. The winds which blew off the dragons' Sacred Mountains seemed to find their way in through the thick stones of the castle itself. Despite the efforts of the best mages, her mother sank gradually from life. In one of her last, lucid moments, she had pressed into Fianna's hand the gold and ruby Summoning Ring. Fianna raised a hand and touched the band where it rested against her neck, held fast on a chain of gold.

'Take one last look.' Her father's soft voice startled Fianna. She glanced at him, but Stannard was studying the room. 'Fourteen months have passed since I placed my seal on wet plaster outside this door. But the seasons turn on, and the year is soon over. This is the last time we will see this place as she left it. Tomorrow, all must change. Will you want these rooms?'

'No!' The violence of her response finally made him look at her. 'Leave them like this.'

Her father sighed. He ran a hand through his short cropped hair, and for the first time she realised that the once red head was now chased through with grey. 'The year

of mourning is now past, Fia. These apartments must be opened again, and we must both dress in lighter colours. Life must go on.'

Fianna felt her hands bunch into small, useless fists. 'I don't want to forget her.'

'No, you must not.' Stannard shook his head. 'Always remember how you felt, fourteen months ago, and again today. Anyone who dies leaves others behind to mourn. Remember that, when you are Queen, and have to order knights into battle. For every one that dies, more are left with dark clothing and empty rooms.'

'We're not at war,' she said stubbornly, kicking at a pattern in the carpet.

'Not at the moment. But one never knows what may come from the Third Kingdom.' He walked over to the bed and retrieved the book. 'You should have this. It always was your favourite.'

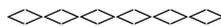
Fianna numbly accepted the volume, the cover dry and cracked. The emblem of the royal house was etched into the leather, the dragon's long neck curved around the title. 'Will I ever meet a dragon, Father?'

'You might, at your coronation. The Family appeared at mine.' He moved through the bedchamber, touching the game board, studying a portrait. His next words were soft, as if meant to be heard only by himself. 'Yes, you are now my heir.'

'But I already was,' Fianna protested. 'You said so.'

'Only if no boy were born to your mother.' He returned to her, touched her briefly on one shoulder. 'That's why your aunt wasn't Queen, though she's three years older than I am. In any other family, the firstborn inherits. But the Dragon Throne goes to a male, if one exists. Come, Fianna, your mother's body must be put to the flames. Her spirit has now had time to leave her.'

Fianna allowed him to take her from the room. She kept the book with her as they descended into the catacombs beneath the castle, pressing the tome against her chest like a shield. With a calm, steady voice, her father spoke the final words over her mother's casket, his torch spluttering in the damp. Then he dropped the flame onto the oak, and they turned away as the fire began at their backs.



The rustle of papers and a heavy sigh made Fianna look up from where she sat by the fire, using the light to practice in her copybook. She absently rubbed an cramped hand as she watched her father move to add another log to the flames. 'So, Fianna, what did you think of that last judgement today?'

'Why didn't you tell that man to shut up?' she asked. 'He kept going on and on about how it wasn't fair that he didn't have more land, and that you wouldn't do anything about it.'

'What would you have done?'

'Told him that I decided who had land, so he should just go away and be happy with what he's got.'

His light eyes regarded her for a moment. 'And what gives you the right to say that?'

'Because I'd be Queen.' He smiled slightly, and Fianna flushed, uncertain. 'Doesn't that make me right?'

'A ruler is no better or worse than those he rules.' Stannard leaned back in his favourite armchair. He lit his pipe for his nightly smoke, a habit Fianna's mother had tried and failed to break. Fianna had always secretly liked the rich smell of the tobacco mixture her father used. 'I am King because I sired by the last king, and you will be Queen merely because you were born to my wife. Ability has nothing to do

with it. You didn't become my heir by proving yourself the best suited to rule. Only by pure chance were you born to the royal house rather than to a village farmer. Keep that in mind. I've found it helps me maintain a more humble perspective.'

Fianna frowned, trying to understand what he meant. 'But why did you let him keep talking?'

'Sometimes, a king has to judge. Other times, he has to remain silent.' Stannard smiled around his pipe. 'The man simply wanted me to listen.'

'And if you didn't want to?'

'What I wanted wasn't important. There are many times when a ruler's own personal wishes have to come last.'

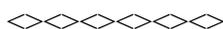
Fianna frowned to herself. I, she decided, would've told him to shut up.

Her father shifted in his seat, retrieving a document. 'I've been reviewing names for a new Castellan.'

Fianna tensed. 'That was mother's job.'

'Yes,' he agreed gently. 'And for the past year, we've all been doing our best to keep the household running smoothly. Bernard keeps reminding me of all the extra work he's done.' He shared a grimace with her. 'You're not yet old enough to take the duties on yourself. My old friend, the Duke of Cassern, has a young daughter raised to the challenges of managing a castle. He's offered to bring her here. Her name is Marissa. Do you think that would be a good idea?'

'I guess so.' Fianna stared at the fire. For some reason she suddenly felt cold.



Early flowers were beginning to respond to the first warmer days of spring. Fianna waited at the castle entrance, at the side of her father, as servants spread blooms across the courtyard. Bernard had told her how important the Duke was, as head of the second house of the Fourth Kingdom, and he'd instructed her to wear royal colours to honour the man. Fianna felt her skin twitch under the new clothes, red tunic a shade lighter than her trousers, gold threads woven through the material. She fully expected the Duke's family to gawp over her, and tediously list the eligible boys of rank which might be interested in a marriage pact, though her father had always calmly insisted that she would be free to pick her own consort. The only thing which lightened the day was the newly forged coronet holding back her long hair. This was the first time she'd ever worn the gold circlet of her status, and its slight weight made her straighten with pride.

Two knights rode through the gates first, blue and orange silks flapping against mail. They formally presented their swords hilt first to the King's guards, then took up positions on either side of the entrance. The Duke came in next. Fianna only glanced at the dark bearded man, finding his stallion far more interesting. The dappled grey moved well, eagerly arching his neck as he scented the stables nearby. Few fighters rode whole males, most preferring the more controllable geldings and mares.

The stallion was reined in a few yards from the entrance to the castle proper. Stannard moved forward, taking hold of the horse's reins before one of the waiting grooms could dash in. 'Latham,' he said warmly. 'Welcome, old friend.'

The Duke grunted. He slid to the ground, and the two men clasped forearms, the gesture of equals. Stannard glanced back, and Fianna obediently came to his side. 'My daughter, the Princess Fianna.'

Latham bowed. 'Your Highness. You've grown since I last saw you.'

Fianna wondered why adults so often told her that. Then she repeated the words the Court Recorder had drilled into her. ‘Duke Latham, you honour our house with your presence. We are the stronger for your friendship.’

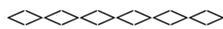
White teeth flashed under the thick moustache. ‘Well spoken, my Lady.’ He turned his head. ‘May I present my own daughter, the Lady Marissa.’

His daughter had dismounted a short distance away while they spoke. Now she walked up to them, her flowing dress a bright green which went well with her brown hair. She must’ve changed in the city, Fianna decided, noting the lack of mud on the silk. Stopping beside the Duke, she dropped into a quick curtsy. ‘Your Majesty, Your Highness, I’m proud to place myself at your service. I hope that I will please you in my efforts.’

‘You have come highly recommended,’ Stannard said warmly. Fianna glanced up at him, startled by a new note in his voice. ‘I’m sure you will do well. Otherwise, I’m certain we could use more assistance in the kennels.’

‘Come now, sir,’ Marissa said, smiling, ‘surely I have a sweeter nature than that?’

Stannard stared at her for a moment. Then he laughed, the first genuine laugh Fianna had heard from him since her mother’s death. She shifted restlessly, not understanding the joke. ‘She’s certainly worthy of you, Latham. Come, let’s go inside, and discuss your duties over a glass of wine.’



The change began slowly. Happy in her duties in stables and kennels, and new experiences gained in the practice yard with dagger and spear, Fianna didn’t take much notice when Marissa began to use the King’s first name. She was nursing bruises and pride from a fall from a warhorse the first time the Castellan called her father by his family nickname, Stan, and plans for recapturing the respect of her fellow pages seemed far more important.

Summer came, and Marissa spread her interests. She ventured into the kennels one day, the wide skirts she favoured out of place in the warm, doggy environment. Fianna glanced up, annoyed. The kennelmistress was allowing her to assist with a whelping bitch, and the first puppy was yet to emerge. It was the kennelmistress who spoke to the woman. ‘Castellan, how may we serve you?’

Marissa twitched her skirts back from the whelping box. ‘I came to speak to Fia.’

‘Fianna,’ she told Marissa. Only her father used that nickname. ‘I’m busy right now.’

‘I’m sure Ellenor can manage on her own.’

Fianna saw the quiet plea in the kennelmistress’s eyes. As Castellan, Marissa outranked Ellenor. Rising reluctantly to her feet, Fianna asked her, ‘Next time?’

‘Next time,’ Ellenor promised, then leaned forward again.

The sounds of a working castle surrounded them as Fianna followed Marissa across the courtyard. Pages were practising in the training yard, wood thwacking against wood as training swords crossed. In the horse ring beyond them, a stallion was being put through his paces, circling his handler at the end of a lounge line. From beyond the walls came the sound of arrow tips driving into straw, and laughs as the archers sought to best one another.

Then they were inside the castle. Servants moved quietly through the hall, cleaning tiles, restocking firewood. The rich smell of freshly waxed wood tickled Fianna’s nose, and she put a finger against her nostrils to prevent a sneeze.

Marissa led her into the Castellan's office, a small room on the ground level of the castle. Changes had been made since Fianna's mother had occupied it. Gone were the family portraits and paintings of the hawks bred by her own family. Maps of the Fourth Kingdom hung in their stead, and an etching of the Sacred Mountains.

Fianna dropped into a chair opposite the large desk. No one could sit before a member of the royal family did, so her father had told her it was only polite for a sovereign to take a seat as soon as possible. Marissa, hampered by her skirts, lowered herself more gently, patting the folds into place around her. 'You don't mind me calling you by your first name, do you?'

'No.' Fianna shrugged. 'The other pages do.'

She was rewarded by a quick frown at such a familiarity. 'I wanted to ask you about your duties. We see so little of you in the castle.'

'I attend my father whenever I should,' Fianna said slowly, wondering what the woman was getting at. 'And I see him every evening for my lessons.'

'Wouldn't it be better for you to be assigned to castle duties?' Marissa gave her what was obviously meant to be a winning smile. 'I mean, it can't be nice to clean out stables and walk dogs--'

'Lady Castellan, I asked to be assigned to those tasks.' Fianna stood. 'If that's all you wanted me for, I'll go now.'

'You need to learn other skills,' Marissa continued, rising as well. 'And it would be good to see you in something other than trousers.'

Fianna felt anger rise in her, fought against it. Her father had taken her to task before about her temper. 'You, my lady, are not my mother. Only my sire outranks me, and unless he says otherwise, I will continue in my chosen duties.'

She returned to the kennels in time to see the last three pups born. The seventh was weak and small, and the kennelmistress was not surprised when it died in Fianna's hands. 'Oft occurs to the runt,' she said dismissively, more interested in examining the healthy pups.

Fianna stared down at the limp body which barely covered her palm. A moment ago, it had been breathing, albeit weakly. Now its spirit was gone, after only seconds of life. 'What do we do with it?'

'Place it with the usual refuse.'

Something inside Fianna protested at such a dismissal. 'I take my leave of you,' she told the woman formally.

Inside her locker she found an old shirt, red and gold. Wrapping the body carefully in the folds, she approached the stable hand on duty for the use of a horse. He saddled up a mare for her, and agreed to give word to any searching for her that she had ridden into the city. She paid little attention when one of the guards on duty mounted and followed after her. Such precautions had followed her throughout her life.

The guard pulled closer to her as they left the castle, and Fianna smiled at his caution. She had visited both of the other two cities of the Fourth Kingdom, and found them ordinary and boring. In Secundus, magic literally ran down the twisting streets. Parts of the city were known to disappear for days at a time, only to emerge at another sector within the walls. Maps were meaningless, and many a traveller had found a journey which should only have taken minutes expanding to fill a day as he followed the ever changing paths. No one knew the reason for the unpredictability. Some thought it came from the siting of the Mages' College at the foot of the castle, others that it was an ancient protection against invasion. The only ones immune to the magic were those of the royal household, for whom the streets always remained fixed.

Fianna thought she felt an awareness when she entered the city proper, just below imagination but not quite concrete enough to call reality. As if *Secondus* recognised her as one its special ones. As she usually did, she issued a mental welcome, pleased at her special treatment.

Some of the citizens she rode past recognised her. But as she wasn't wearing the colours of her house, they merely nodded acknowledgements and let her continue on her private business. Fianna rode without pausing, though smells from the food stalls by one market made her stomach rumble. At the city gates the guards saluted her as she passed outside.

Warm days had hardened the springtime mud to hard earth outside the walls. Fianna carefully directed the mare around the wide gashes of cart wheels, then sent her into a canter up into the nearby hills. She buried the pup under one of the large trees. The first to die in my service? she thought, lowering the wrapped body into the small hole. She glanced up at the guard, but he was politely staring off in the distance. Nobody had ever died in her presence before, but she had the uncomfortable feeling that this puppy was not to be the only one during her reign.

She stayed outside the city longer than she had planned. Despite the lateness of the evening, she still stopped her horse beside the Sign. 'What do you think?' she asked the guard beside her. 'Will it speak today?'

Two cylinders of rolled metal, thicker and sturdier than anything the kingdom's smiths could forge, rose from a slight hill. Several horses could ride between them at once. The pillars supported the massive Sign, holding it a hundred feet above their heads. *Welcome to Secondus* was spelled out in golden letters, bright against the red background.

'I've never heard it make a sound, Your Highness,' the guard said.

'Neither have I.' Fianna looked up with longing. 'My sire says it stopped speaking during his father's reign. And, before that, it even used to sing.'

'Sing?'

'A tune in praise of *Secondus*.' Fianna kned her horse between the supports, but the only sound was a breeze wisping weeds against the metal. Once again she wondered who had built the Sign, and why.

They continued back to the city. As she rode back up to the castle, the white towers tinged red by the setting sun, Fianna recalled that she was due to meet her father early this evening. Gritting her teeth against the urge to gallop her horse over the hard cobblestones, she instead counted the twists in the road up to the castle gates.

Jeremy was lounging in the stables when she rode in, and he willingly took the mare from her, promising to give her a good rub down. Fianna hurried into the shower rooms, washing quickly before donning court clothes. Then she hesitated. Her father's offices were across the courtyard, through the entry hall, down one wing, and along several corridors. A fifteen minute walk. Or, if she used the servants' passages, which wove behind and between the royal rooms, she could run and be there in five minutes.

He'll forgive me this once, she decided, and set off along the underground corridor to the castle. The hallways had recently been redecorated, and the smell of fresh paint still hung in the air. Some of the doors had not yet had their signs returned, but Fianna knew her way well enough without the notices. She halted outside the door to her father's study, taking several deep breaths and adjusting her tunic. She smiled at the deep rumble of his voice. Then a higher tone made her lean closer, the door tipping open at her slight weight.

'But she should be in the castle.' The voice was Marissa's, indignant. 'Have you seen her out there, Stan? Covered in horse muck like any common page.'

‘There are no common pages in Secundus.’ Her father sounded amused, and Fianna felt herself exhale in relief. ‘All of them come from noble families. It can only stand to her good if Fia forms friendships with them now. One day, they will be her knights and subjects, with more reason than duty alone to protect her and her kingdom.’

‘If she does become Queen.’

Fianna tensed at the remark. ‘I was old when she was born, Maris. I think it unlikely that I will sire another child now.’

‘But if we do have a boy?’

‘If you ever became pregnant, and gave me a son, by the laws of the Fourth Kingdom he would inherit the Dragon Throne.’

Fianna drew back, the door shutting softly. For a long moment, she was numb with shock. Suddenly the looks her father had exchanged with Marissa over the dinner table made sense. The long rides away from the castle, just the two of them, Marissa’s nightly appearances in the King’s apartments when Fianna was taking her leave... Her father was going to marry this woman. Just into the second year after her mother’s death, and he intended to betray her memory by taking a new wife.

Maybe it won’t happen, she thought hopefully. Maybe he’ll see it’s wrong. I won’t say anything yet. She hurried through another exit, entering the main castle corridors. Now she would be late, but her anger at her father’s intended betrayal should be taken as understandable dismay for being tardy.



Rumours began to flow and eddy through the castle. Marissa was granted a new set of rooms in the ground floor, near one of the enclosed gardens. New dresses were ordered for her, incorporating the royal colours. Several maids were elevated to ladies-in-waiting. Fianna scowled at the whispers between her fellow pages, and worked harder than ever on her new lessons on horse ailments and their cures. She also had her first taste of command, drilling a squadron of mounted pages on placid mounts for mock battles in the summer tournaments.

‘You have a sure touch with both people and horses,’ the training master told her one evening, holding the reins of her mare as she ran her hands down a swollen leg. But as she started to smile at the praise, he continued, ‘You’ll always have a place as a knight and a commander, even if...’

He trailed off. Fianna rose slowly. ‘Even if what?’

Jacard looked away. ‘I speak out of turn, my lady. The announcement is only hours old.’

‘Announcement?’ she demanded. ‘What announcement?’

A flush of red crept up the man’s face. ‘Your pardon, my lady. I had thought you knew. The King has announced that he will take the Lady Marissa as wife.’

‘The tendon is bowed,’ Fianna heard herself say. ‘Could you ask the healer to see to her, Jacard? I should attend the engagement dinner.’

Without waiting to hear his mumbled response, she moved to the showers. The exhilaration of the day’s successful exercises had dropped away, leaving behind it a growing anger. So, she was the last to know. Her father had declared his intentions, and not thought of telling his only child.

Only child for now. She closed her eyes, letting hot water run down her hair, pound against the stiff muscles of her back. I know he’s old, but Marissa isn’t. And she’ll be Queen, and she’ll be able to tell me what to do. If she wants me in the castle,

away from the stables, she'll have the right. She could even make me one of her ladies-in-waiting.

The thought made Fianna use one of Ern's favourite oaths. The words sounded grandly horrible, echoing against the tiled shower room. Fianna scrubbed herself furiously. She was never going to serve Marissa. No matter what, she was going to be far from here before that woman tried to give her any orders.

In the dressing room she automatically reached for silks. Then, her lips thinning, she instead lifted out woollen trousers and a cotton jerkin, both in the dull colours of a stable hand. In the armoury she chose a dagger and a sword short enough for her reach. Using the servants' passageways to climb to her rooms, she packed a few items into a pair of saddlebags. She saddled her favourite mare, then leaned against her for a moment, fighting for control of her emotions. Then she left her mount in the stall, the mare chewing impatiently at her bit.

The engagement dinner had already begun, the nobles present at the castle seated around the table to toast the couple. The conversation stilled as Fianna appeared at the door, her hand flexing above the hilt of her sword.

'Fianna.' Her father rose from his seat, his calm, commanding voice a rebuke. 'You will apologise to Lady Marissa for this entrance.'

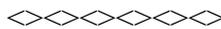
So, he wasn't even going to try to explain. Already he was taking the side of his new consort. 'Your lady she might be,' Fianna said angrily, 'and your Queen, but she will never be either to me.'

Marissa started from her seat, speaking quietly to Stannard. He brushed her words away. 'That sounds near to a challenge, my daughter.'

For a moment neither of them moved. Then Fianna looked at his wide shoulders, his height, and the equally tall man waiting behind his chair as King's Champion. 'I do not challenge you, Father,' she said finally, lowering her hand. Turning on her heel, she strode from the room and the castle.

A guard fell in behind her as she rode the mare through the gates. Fianna set her mount into a trot, soon losing the guard as the streets twisted and changed behind her. Pausing only to buy some food from a street stall, she hurried from the city.

The night was clear, the roads lit blue and green by the double moons, and Fianna enjoyed the feel of the fresh air on her face as she chewed a meat roll. She knew exactly where to go. Her aunt lived in a small town near the kingdom's borders. Several years ago, Fianna had visited her, and she remembered the landmarks back to Lundern. The Lady Sallah would take her in while Fianna decided about her future. Her heart light, Fianna pressed the mare into a rocking canter, and let the miles slide past under her mount's hooves.



A storm blew over a few days later. Fianna cursed the lack of foresight which had made her neglect to pack a rain cloak. Her food supplies dwindled, and her stomach grumbled with hunger. She kept the mare plodding on under the grey skies. Finally, five days later, she rode into Lundern, the streets all but deserted in the late evening.

Her aunt's mansion was set apart from the rest of the town. Fianna passed the grand entry porch to go on to the stables, a lifetime's training reminding her that the needs of her horse came first. A stable hand rose from a hay bale as she opened the doors. 'And who be ye?'

‘Fianna, Princess of the Fourth Kingdom and niece to the Lady Sallah.’ Fianna dismounted and, when the man showed no signs of assisting her, led the mare herself into a stall. ‘Would you send word that I have arrived?’

‘Be she expecting ye?’

‘No.’ Fianna placed water and hay into the stall, and removed bridle and saddle as the mare began to feed. At least the small stables were well organised. She easily found cloths and blankets. Rubbing the mare dry, she draped a blanket over the horse, then grabbed the saddlebags.

‘Go to the house,’ the stable hand told her when he returned. ‘Ye will wait the lady’s pleasure in her hall.’

Fianna nodded curtly. Already wet through, she walked unhurriedly to the house, ignoring the rain slicking her hair. A servant opened the door for her, then left her standing in the hallway. Fianna watched water drip from her clothes onto the black tiles, wondering if the servant had got lost looking for her aunt.

The woman finally returned. ‘The Lady Sallah will see you now,’ she said formally. Fianna followed her to a large room, finding her aunt seated behind a massive table. The servant closed the door behind her as she left.

‘Aunt Sallah,’ Fianna said, starting to smile.

The old woman rose and came around the table. The flickering oil lamps brushed over the tightly bound grey hair, and brought no warmth to the green eyes. Strong hands rested on a thick cane as she studied Fianna. The sternness in her gaze made Fianna swallow. ‘What would you have of me, girl?’

‘Shelter and sustenance, my lady.’ Fianna edged towards the warm fire, wondering why her aunt wasn’t offering her a blanket or a hot drink. ‘I have ridden a long way.’

Sallah rested back against the table. ‘And why is the heir to the Dragon Throne not in Secondus Castle?’

‘He who sits on the Throne has taken another woman to wife.’ Fianna caught a shift in the harsh lines of her aunt’s face, and knew that her description of her father had found her some approval. ‘I couldn’t stay.’

Sallah nodded. ‘You will have to work for your keep.’

After her initial start of surprise, Fianna raised her head proudly. ‘I’m skilled in stable and kennel.’

Her aunt smiled slightly. ‘I know of your skills with horse and hound. But I will teach you much more. You must be able to take the Throne when the King dies. Has he taught you aught about ruling?’

‘I’ve stood beside him while he’s made judgements,’ Fianna answered. ‘He’s taught me that a ruler must use both justice and mercy, and ask the opinion of others before deciding anything important.’

Sallah laughed. Fianna blushed at the mocking note. ‘Then I will teach you what he did not. A ruler answers to no one. All decisions are ultimately hers, despite whatever counsel she weakens herself by taking. Therefore, it is best that she depends on no one, needs no one. Only then is she strong.’

‘But I might not be Queen.’ Fianna found her face heating at the injustice. ‘Marissa might have a son.’

‘Only if Stannard can still sire a child.’ Sallah leaned forward. ‘That is the reason why he has decided to remarry, after all.’

Fianna blinked. ‘What is?’

‘Why, to have a son, of course.’

Yes, of course, Fianna thought. Sallah was right. Maybe this was why her father hadn't liked to have his sister in the castle. She knew too much about him. 'He's betrayed both us,' she said angrily. 'My mother, and me. Weren't we good enough?'

'You'll still rule.' Firelight added a red tinge to her aunt's eyes. 'With me to assist you, we'll ensure that you will one day be Queen. But you must agree to obey me, while you live under my roof and eat at my table. Do you understand?'

Fianna nodded. 'I understand.' Yes, she reflected bitterly, I understand a lot of things now.

'Then take my offer of hospitality.' Sallah smiled grimly. 'Yes, you will need to learn to take whatever you can, Fianna. That is the way to power. Take what you need to get what you want. Including a Throne.'

A servant led her to a small room on the third level of the house. Fianna gratefully warmed herself in a bath, then changed into dry clothes. She stared out the window for awhile, physically tired, but her mind not letting her rest. In that direction lay Secundus, and beyond it, the Sacred Mountains of the dragons. For a moment, she wished that a dragon would come to carry her away, even as one did a King several centuries ago. That would make her father sorry, wouldn't it? He'd leave Marissa and ride into the mountains, pleading for her safe return. And the Family would demand that he put her onto the Throne...

Fianna turned away and crawled into her bed. Strangely enough, although she couldn't remember the exact details of her dreams the next morning, they were not about dragons, but unicorns.

## CHAPTER TWO

Birds erupted into flustered, hurried flight as the colts clattered down the rocks to the stream. Water slapped against their chests, darkening white hide as they plunged aching legs into the chill current. Wind from their passing flung tails sharp against muscled hindquarters and tangled manes around spiralling horns.

The Prancer raised his head to watch the stream birds settle onto nearby trees. They raised their voices to complain at the colts. He laughed, and reared up to whisk a silver hoof through the singing water. Drops sparkled through the sunlight to burst against the branches. The birds flicked their wings and rose to higher perches.

‘Prancer,’ Storm complained, ‘you’re making the water muddy and I’m thirsty.’

Dropping back down with another splash, the Prancer turned his head to meet Storm’s gaze. ‘Right. Sorry.’

‘You don’t mean it.’ Storm lowered his head and watched the water clear. The beginnings of a beard, still little more than wisps of longer hair, brushed against the current. The Prancer felt a pang of envy, wondering when his own beard would begin to grow. He was the last one of his season still clean-chinned.

Finally Storm was satisfied. He drank noisily. The Prancer took a few sips himself, reluctant to drink his fill. He wanted to run again. The fields just past these woods called to him. His hooves ached to spring through grass, a much more a forgiving surface than the bare earth under the trees.

He nudged Storm with his shoulder. ‘Dare you to run past the woods.’

The other unicorn shook drops from his beard. ‘Dare you to skip lessons tomorrow.’

The Prancer sighed. ‘You know I need to practice.’

‘Non-Thought’s easy,’ Storm said. He raised his head, stilled. In a moment even the Prancer had to struggle to pick out his form. Storm’s horn took on the blue of the sky, his body the grey-blue of the stream and the mottled brown of the opposite bank. Water eddied around four evenly placed rocks, flashing silver. ‘See?’ With his word, he shimmered back into view.

‘Easy for you,’ the Prancer grumbled. ‘I just can’t keep my thinking still that long.’

Storm shifted uneasily. ‘I asked the Teacher about that. Yesterday.’

‘You did?’ The Prancer was caught between annoyance about being talked about when his flanks were turned, and intrigue at what the Teacher might have said. Curiosity, as always, won out. ‘What did she say?’

‘You find it hard, because you’re different.’ Storm pointed with his horn. ‘You know.’

Yes. He knew. The water was swift-flowing past his forelegs, but the Prancer didn’t need a mirrored surface to show him the markings, stark black on his coat of white. Both and neither. The five spots spread across the top of his right hind leg, the mark of the Painter. The jagged sign of lightning on his left shoulder, the mark of the Dancer. No unicorn could be both. And he was neither. ‘I know, I’m different.’

‘You’re my friend,’ Storm said suddenly, throwing it out with the diffidence of strong emotion.

The Prancer looked up the curving stream. Water blended with sunlight in his eyes, merging in a confusion of bright colour. There were so many things he did not understand, even after six years of life. Why the adults treated him with such a

mixture of deference and loathing, speaking always politely, their eyes rolling back to show the whites below the pupils. Why the Teacher, when telling the Lesson Stories, would sometimes fall silent, as if shuffling through the words of the ancient tales to discover the point at which she could resume the recitation. Why he carried marks which should appear on two different foals. Why he knew, somehow, that he should have had a sister, born at the same time, from the same dam. Why he knew all these things, when no one had ever told him. And, above all, why no one would ever speak his mother's name.

Storm spoke again, awkwardly, 'And you're my milk-brother.'

The Prancer nibbled at jagged cut along Storm's shoulder. 'I think this will scar.'

'Scar, or no scar, I will not let Talltree insult you. He might feel more than my hooves, next time.'

'I think you're the only one of the herd not frightened to be with me.'

Storm snorted. 'I can remember when you couldn't even stand up without my dam's help. Besides, the Dancer isn't scared of you.'

The Prancer splashed water with a hoof, not wanting to think about his sire. He'd had enough of reflections for awhile. 'Dare you to miss the Judgement.'

Storm's nostrils flared at the reckless idea. 'Dare you to gallop back to the Dancing Ground.'

So, that was his answer. The Prancer stared up at the trees, top branches waving in a high breeze. He had to attend the Judgement, they both knew that. As ever, Storm kept him out of trouble. 'All right.' And he twisted in the water, throwing himself around and back up the bank. Storm, less agile, was splattered with water and then mud as the Prancer reached the woods ahead of him.

By the time they came near the Dancing Ground, Storm's longer strides had pulled him into the lead. He cut across the Prancer, forcing him to slow to a more decorous trot. The Prancer didn't need Storm's warning glance as the trail widened, marking the entrance to the holy place. The Teacher's lessons grated in his mind. The Ground should always be entered with humility and dignity, in recognition of the power which ran between tree and stone, between Dancer and the four elements on which he called for strength and inspiration.

They were the last of the herd to arrive. The Dancer's dark eyes met the Prancer's briefly, and he knew that his father would have words with him later. Bending his neck to feign meekness, he followed Storm to their place, alongside the other foals of their season. They completed the circle of silvery-white unicorns, standing still and tall within the larger circle of oaks. Long branches stretched over their heads, spring leaves touched occasionally by a silver horn.

The Dancer waited until all attention was turned on him. Then he took his place in the centre. Sunlight filtered through the tight-knit branches, gleaming on his jet black coat. The Prancer blinked. The white lightning mark on the left shoulder almost seemed to twist in the light. He shifted, restless, and Storm's tail slapped against his hindquarters in warning.

The Teacher had recently taught the Prancer's season the ritual of Judgement. She had not tried to hide from them the element missing in recent rituals. The earth captured by the circle of unicorns was bare but for a pair of boulders, and a pair of rowan trees. The Dancer should stand between the rocks and, facing him, the Painter should be flanked by the trees. But the herd had no Painter. The last one had died six years ago. So the Dancer stood alone in the centre, his angry gaze and arched neck denying anyone the right to challenge his place there.

‘We are all come to the Dancing Ground, the place of Judgement,’ he said, his deep voice spreading easily around the circle of one hundred and twenty unicorns. ‘She who is to tread the lines, stand forth and speak the name you hold now.’

A young mare, her first foal watched over by another nearby, took a step forward. ‘I have come, Lord Dancer. My name is Rathlin.’

The Dancer continued, ‘Do you submit yourself freely to Judgement?’

Rathlin trembled for a moment. Then she said, her voice steady, ‘I willingly choose to walk the lines.’

The Dancer backed away, black mane tumbling over his eyes as he tossed his head. He halted between the rocks, his horn almost reaching as far as their tall shapes. The Prancer held his breath, all thoughts of avoiding the ritual gone. Although this would be the first Judgement he had attended, he felt as if the events to follow were familiar, as if he’d seen them before. Even without the Teacher’s telling, he knew that the Painter should be withdrawing at this point, taking her place outside the square of trees and rocks, centred in her prepared drawings.

The silver horn, stark against the black forehead, was raised to the sky. The stallion struck the ground once as he silently called upon the powers of the air to aid him. Next, he lowered the bright tip to the ground, darkening the spirals as he took in the power of earth. From a small pool in the rock to his left he touched the strength of water, washing his horn clean. With a shower of sparks he scraped silver along the right stone, taking in the opposing power of fire.

Balanced upon four hooves, between the four elements, muscles shifting under glossy coat, the Dancer strode forward to the two rowan trees. At a precise point just before their slender trunks, he shifted to the left, and circled the tree before starting back to the stones. Once there, he again stepped to his left, and strode around the rock before walking between them, back to the trees.

As before, the Prancer felt his perception widen. Following in the Dancer’s footsteps, as if unwoven from his being, stretched a blue line of light. As he continued to prance around the tree and stone on his right, the line tightened, steadied in the air.

The Dancer completed the first cycle. Without pause he began the second revolution, laying a second band of light alongside the first. Where the lines crossed his hooves sparked, forcing him to pick up his feet. The energies began to glow, warming the clearing. The Prancer had to force himself to stay in his place, squinting against the brightness. He glanced at those standing near him, their eyes open, their breathing untroubled. Did they not feel the energy called forth by the Dancer?

Four times the Dancer stepped between stones and trees. Each time the steady increase in power forced him to raise his hooves higher and higher, his prance becoming exaggerated. The crossings grew taller, so that he leapt over each, black tail flicking over black back. The Dancer was earning his title and his name.

The lines complete, he returned to the centre. His coat was overlaid with a sheen of bright blue, reflecting the energy swirling around him. ‘Rathlin,’ he called. ‘Walk the lines.’

The mare shuffled forward, moving around the Dancer to follow the path he had taken. The lines parted before her, reformed after her tail. Again the Prancer felt the sense of wrongness. The Painter should have followed the Dancer’s lead, adding from her own being to augment his power.

Sweat was forming on the Dancer’s flanks, blue-white against black. The Prancer felt the strength it took to keep the lines flowing around rock and tree. Part of the energy was building up within Rathlin, sensitising her to the Dancer. Preparing her for Judgement.

The mare completed her single circle. The Prancer moved closer to Storm, taking comfort in his friend's nearness. Was he the only one who could sense it? he wondered. Did none of the rest of them know how wrong this was, the Dancer without the Painter? Judgement without mercy?

Rathlin spoke the ceremonial words. 'I have trod the lines.'

'And what have they shown you?' asked the Dancer.

'I have been overly harsh with my foal.' Her voice was very quiet, ashamed. 'I have not forgiven the actions of the young.'

The Prancer felt the assent in the gathered herd. They all knew that Rathlin had been found rearing over the colt, sharp hooves aimed at the fragile body, as she screamed her rage at finding him in the process of fouling their sleeping place.

Now should be the time for the Painter to lower her horn to the mare. But there was no Painter, only the Dancer. The Prancer felt a sudden sickness in his second stomach. As if he himself had walked the lines, he knew why Rathlin had attacked her foal. She was very young to motherhood, choosing to run with a stallion before her time. She had not expected to become a dam so soon. With time, and the patient help of a more experienced mare, she would overcome her anger and resentment.

He was suddenly aware that his father's deep eyes were on him. As if he were waiting for the Prancer to join him in the circle. But I'm not a Painter, he thought, his knees trembling. Painters are always mares.

The Dancer returned his gaze to Rathlin. She stood still as he lowered his head, touching her shoulder with his horn. Power arched over her body, encapsulating her momentarily in blue. Then she lifted her head, the trees echoing with her swift cry of pain.

'Rathlin, mare of the herd,' the Dancer said sternly, cutting across the noise. 'You are unable to control your temper around your foal. For his safety, his care will be entrusted to another. Nor shall any stallion run with you for three seasons. So are you judged.'

He stepped back. The lines fluttered, then died. The herd's lead mare broke the circle first, touching Rathlin's back with her muzzle in sympathy before brushing past her to take the foal away. A second mare came to Rathlin, nudging her from the Ground. In twos and threes, the rest of the herd departed, even Storm leaving the Prancer's side. Soon only he and the Dancer remained.

The Dancer's head hung down, horn nearly touching the ground. His legs were braced as he took deep, shuddering breaths. With yet another flash of insight, the Prancer knew that his father carried alone the burden meant to be shared by two.

'You wanted to come into the circle.' The deep voice was muted by weariness. 'Why didn't you?'

Words bunched together in the Prancer's throat. Most frightening of all, he felt some truth push its way to the surface, knowledge he wasn't ready to face. Soil churned under his hooves and he turned and then cantered away from the circle.

Storm was waiting for him, a discreet distance from the Ground. The Prancer paused beside him, hooves tearing impatiently at the moss. 'Dare you to steal an apple from the herd tree.'

'Prancer, I'm not sure--'

But he was gone, leaving Storm's words behind. His ears flicked back, catching the heavy sigh of the older colt. Then muffled hooves started after him, and the Prancer laughed. Life was full of green leaves and sunshine and friends, dares to make and apples to steal. He lengthened his strides, leaving the Ground and a tired stallion far behind.



The next morning dawned with a brisk edge to the air. The Prancer raised his head from grazing, nostrils fluttering as he sampled the mingled crispness of grass and stronger scent of the herd. From further away came the smoke of the humans, cold after the several days travel from their city to unicorn lands. The Prancer chewed thoughtfully, wondering what humans actually looked like. How could a creature balance on two limbs?

Storm, beside him as always, swallowed noisily. ‘Prancer.’

The Prancer pulled his thoughts away from distant places. Storm was standing tall, his tail lifted and neck arched. ‘You have something to tell me.’

‘Yes.’ Storm took a deep breath. ‘I spent several hours at my birth-tree, last night. A new name has come to me. I wanted you to be the first to know it, before I give it to the Dancer to announce.’

A new name. Storm would be the first of their season to come into his second name, the first chosen by himself. ‘I will be honoured to hear it.’

‘I will be called Ansel.’

The Prancer blinked, wondering why the name sounded familiar. A legend he couldn’t quite place... ‘And when will you give it to the Dancer?’

‘Soon.’ Storm shifted uncomfortably. ‘I’m still getting used to it.’

A high whistle floated across the meadow. The Teacher was calling their season to their lessons. ‘What is it today?’ the Prancer grumbled.

‘You know what it is. Non-Thought.’ Storm tossed his head. ‘Dare’s still on.’

The Prancer thought about last week’s lesson, the long hours of concentration. ‘First one to the river gets the apples!’ he told Storm, flicking his tail as he turned to run.

Then he pulled up short, Storm bumping and tripping over him. Standing above them was the Dancer, his eyes dark, tail slapping over his haunches. Storm quickly backed away, nostrils widening as he took in the heavy scent of anger.

‘Go, Storm,’ said the Dancer. ‘Go to your lessons. I want to talk to my son.’

With a quick snort of reassurance to the Prancer, Storm obeyed. The Prancer swallowed, feeling very small next to the stallion. ‘I should go to lessons too.’

‘You seemed little interested a moment ago.’

The Prancer looked down, pawing at the dirt. ‘I guess not.’

His father strode away. After a moment’s hesitation the Prancer followed. ‘All foals miss lessons,’ the deep voice continued. ‘Especially as they grow older. Soon you’ll be a young stallion, ready to run with the fillies of your season. And to learn from me.’

‘Learn what?’ the Prancer asked, dreading the answer.

‘The role for which you have been marked from birth.’ The black tail flicked in front of the Prancer as they reached a rise in the ground. ‘I expect one of your season will soon give me a second name to announce. I noted Storm by his birth-tree last night.’

‘He’s almost ready,’ the Prancer admitted.

‘And when will you be?’

The Prancer halted at the top of the hill. His father continued down the slope several strides before stopping and turning back to meet his eyes. Earth gave the Prancer precious inches of height, lending him strength. ‘You shouldn’t do it. You shouldn’t have Judgements without a Painter.’

A wind blew through the moment of silence, lifting dark mane from the Dancer's bright horn. He asked quietly, 'Why not?'

'Because it's wrong. There was no understanding of why she did what she did.'

'And if Judgement had not been held,' the Dancer said, 'she might have injured or killed her foal at the next outburst of temper.'

His calm gave the Prancer the courage to continue. 'But she didn't need to have him taken away. She could learn, she could be--'

He broke off. The Dancer added the word he had avoided. 'Healed.'

'I'm not a Painter,' the Prancer protested. 'But there shouldn't be Judgement without mercy.'

But the Dancer was no longer looking at him. He was gazing into the distance, past the hills which marked the end of the herd's territory. 'The herd was never meant to have one Painter and Dancer alone. In my father's father's time, the herd was served by three pairs. When one died, a mare would run with the Dancer, and would afterwards give birth to a new set of twins. But the numbers have dwindled, until only one pair was given to my generation.' He swung his head back to the Prancer. 'Did you see the lines?'

The Prancer blinked at the sudden change in tone. 'Yes. Doesn't everyone?'

'Very few do, now.' The Dancer sounded grim. 'Long ago, I'm told, all unicorns could see the weaving of the elemental energies. Healing was always the role of the Painter, but all could mend small injuries with the touch of a horn. As the seasons turn I see fewer and fewer foals born with the abilities all once took for granted.'

The Prancer found himself shivering. 'What's happening?'

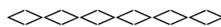
'The magic is going from the Land.'

The Prancer suddenly longed to be running through the woods, chasing squirrels and kicking over toadstools. He was too young for all these adult worries. 'What will you do about it?'

'The humans have their own uses for magic.' Again the eyes were fixed on the far hills, the direction of the human's city, the Prancer realised. 'I would go to them, speak to the king who holds power in our name. But I dare not leave the herd without either Painter or Dancer.'

The Prancer, unsure of what answer he should give, said nothing. He followed his father's gaze into the shimmering distance. For a moment, he thought he saw something take shape from the green-brown earth. A human form, standing upright on two limbs, a red mane surrounding the strange, flat face. He felt the same strange singing through his chest as when he had received his first name at the roots of his birth-tree. This human was important. One day, he would know it by name.

The Dancer snorted. He broke into a trot, long strides carrying him away. The Prancer watched, the afterimage of his vision slowly disappearing into the day's bright sunshine. The Prancer trudged into the woods, his hooves slowed by the unaccustomed weight of deep and heavy thoughts. Listening to the murmurings of the Teacher suddenly seemed like the safest place to be.



Shadows were lengthening as the sun drew close to the Land. The Prancer followed the course of blackness his own body cast, the wavering tip of his horn stretching out towards the hills. Humans used to come from the city which lay beyond, speaking to the herd in their strange, guttural language. 'All hail and welcome,' the Prancer said quietly, practising the latest lesson in Human.

Storm raised his head, swallowing a mouthful of grass. 'You're getting better at that.'

The Prancer's shoulders twitched. 'I've been working on it.'

'It shows.' Storm bumped the Prancer's shoulder, his muzzle rough with young beard. 'I'm going to give my name to the Dancer tomorrow. Will you be my witness?'

The Prancer nodded, honoured although the request was not unexpected. He asked shyly, 'What does your name mean?'

Storm eyed him. 'Don't you know?'

A second's duty was to know. The Prancer glanced away, embarrassed. He would meditate by his birth-tree tonight. The feeling that he should have instantly recognised the name still hung uneasily in the air.

The thud of frantic hooves against soil turned both their heads towards the woods. One of the secondary stallions burst into the meadow, sweat coating his flanks. 'Dragon coming!' he shouted to the grazing unicorns. 'Scatter!'

The Prancer obeyed the sentinel without thinking. He kicked away from Storm, taking three long, jarring strides before freezing in place. The others in the meadow had done the same, the discipline of oft-repeated lessons keeping them from dashing to the relative safety of the trees. The sentinel would have given them the signal if they had time for that. Scatter told them that they had only seconds before the enemy would be upon them.

The herd faded from view. Hooves blended into grasses, eyes into sky, horns into sunset. The Prancer took a deep breath, then released his own thoughts. He became part of the ground, the breeze, the water. The fire of his life sank low, seeking refuge in the other elements.

Wind whistled under skin. The dragon's shadow was flung across the meadow, twisted by the low sun. He emerged over the woods, legs tucked up close against the long belly scales, tail breaking loose leaves from branches. The large wings creaked. The air cupped under the spread of bare skin pressed against the Prancer's ears.

The dragon flew to one end of the meadow. There he executed a graceful turn. Sunlight glinted from scales, red merging to cinnamon, amber, then back to red again. Emerald eyes gleamed as the massive wings lifted him higher, long snout sweeping as he searched for prey.

The Prancer had never seen a dragon before. He watched, fascinated, by the play of light on spines, the contrast of smooth wing leather against rough scale. Although he was twice the size of even the Dancer, the dragon was graceful in the air. The Prancer took a quick breath of awe, forgetting to be afraid. Forgetting not to think.

The long neck uncoiled, swinging the head towards him. The Prancer blinked, suddenly noticing that a shadow was leading away from him, that grass twined around silver hooves. He was visible, his position marked. And the relative safety of the woods was too far away.

The dragon chuckled. The Prancer raised his head as the left wing dipped, curling the hunter towards him. Flame flicked along the jagged teeth, the slitted nostrils. The red-gold reminded the Prancer of the human from his vision, long hair gleaming in the same hue.

A long, high whistle cut across the silence. The Prancer started, breaking free from the dragon's mesmeric gaze. Storm reared as he shimmered into sight, and he called again. The challenge cry of a young stallion, daring an enemy to confrontation.

The dragon twisted, the air groaning under his weight. Storm broke into a gallop, plunging deliberately across the dragon's path. The jaws swung down, reaching for the unicorn, but Storm flung his head back. Silver horn met with scarlet scale. The

dragon roared as dark blood streamed down the spirals. Storm yanked himself free, shook red drops from his eyes. His laughter taunting the injured dragon, he ran across the meadow, leading away from the wavering unicorn forms.

Hunter and hunted skimmed through the air and over the grasses. The Prancer kicked himself out of his strange paralysis. All around him unicorns were appearing, their concentration broken. He ignored them as he galloped, his gaze fixed on the other colt, the dragon bearing down on Storm's white body.

Great wings beat, lifting the dragon further into the sky. For a moment he hung there, his shadow blending with that of the running unicorn. The Prancer's hooves cut deep into the turf as he desperately lengthened his strides. He was close enough to smell the thick dragon blood, the higher scent of Storm's sweat. If only he could distract the dragon, give Storm a chance--

The dragon swooped, forelegs outstretched. Silver claws reached for Storm, glinting in the low sunlight. Storm's tail flicked, eyes wide as he felt the weight above him. The Prancer cried out, a warning which came too late. The metallic talons expanded, then contracted. Blood blossomed as they sank deep into Storm's sides.

Storm threw himself backwards, into the grasp. The tactic surprised the dragon. Storm was suddenly free, blood streaming from ten gashes as he stumbled. The Prancer was near now. A dozen more strides--

The dragon skimmed close to the ground. A single foot reached out, scooping the unicorn from the earth. Storm struggled in the grip, driving the claws deeper into muscle and bone as he forced his way closer to the gleaming eyes. The Prancer pulled up, his knees weak as he watched the silent, deadly battle taking place in the air. One of Storm's kicking legs hit the ground. Skin rippled as he used the shock to drive himself forward. His horn rammed deep into one of the pupils. Green erupted into red, and the dragon howled in shock and pain.

Storm was flung free, spinning onto the ground. Bones snapped under the impact, then the sound was swallowed by the dragon's roar. Flailing wings slapped against the turf as he climbed into the sky. His cries faded as he hurried away from the meadow, back towards the hills.

The Prancer slowed as he came near his friend. The dragon's claws had reached deep. Storm's breathing was laboured, uneven. Blood trickled from his muzzle, and his legs were bent back against themselves in unnatural angles. The red of the setting sun washed over the broken body. The Prancer stopped, touched the bruised muzzle gently.

'Prancer,' Storm said weakly.

'The Dancer's coming,' the Prancer said, more out of hope than truth. Something glinted in the wide eye. 'Heal me.'

The Prancer felt his throat close. Swallowing, he said, 'I'm not a Painter.'

'Then be Dancer.' Storm's eye closed. 'Name me.'

The Prancer drew back. If Storm died with only his first name to this life, he would be reborn to the same level of existence again. Only with a second name came the step to adulthood. But it was the duty of the Dancer to name. Not his. 'Storm, I can't.'

Storm looked up at him. The Prancer saw his own reflection in the glassy eye. Both, and neither. The marks of both Painter and Dancer dark on his coat. If he were to touch Storm with his horn now, what would happen? Would he be Healed? Or would he feel the dread touch of Judgement, dying with only his failures on his mind?

As if reading the Prancer's thoughts, Storm snorted softly. He whispered, 'Dare you to fight a dragon.'

His eyelid drooped. A final breath eased from his throat. His spirit sighed from his body, and the Prancer could do no more than lower his head to honour his passing.



The sun had set, leaving the woods to darkness. The Prancer walked quietly along the trunks. For all his inability to Not-Think at the dragon's attack, now he could bring nothing to his mind. It was easier to leave his thoughts scattered, unfocussed. Storm was gone.

Deeper and deeper into the forest he went. Younger trees broke through the undergrowth here, branches decorated with circlets of unicorn hair, dried flowers, pieces of stream smoothed stone. The sacred heart of the woods, where the herd celebrated births and marked deaths. Unsurprised that his steps had brought him here, the Prancer halted by his birth-tree. He looked up the smooth trunk of the young rowan, wishing suddenly that he had brought a gift. All he had this time was himself.

The silence among the trees slowed his pulse. Only after his heart had returned to its usual, steady beat did he realise how ragged the dragon's attack had left him. He leaned against the slender trunk. Ache was spreading through his chest, no longer held at bay by shock. He had lost Storm.

'I've never spent a night alone before,' he told his birth-tree, speaking to that part of himself which had been buried under its roots, when he was newly born and the tree had been no more than a sapling. Despite the turmoil and sorrow at his mother's death, his after birth had been carried into the woods. The part of himself which sacrificed its existence, so that he might brought safely to life, and which lived on through the tree to which it had provided nourishment. 'I was taken to my cousin and his mother the afternoon I was born. We've always been together.'

He felt the tree support him, allowing him to take weight off his weary hooves. Always he had followed the traditions of the birth-tree, bringing gifts at each change in the seasons. But only now did he know the comfort in the knowledge that another knew how he felt. A part of him was here, would always be here for him. It would wait until his death, when his body would be buried in the same spot, so that the part of his spirit left in the ground long ago could re-join the part of him which had lived and died. Storm would be starting that journey tomorrow.

'He was my friend,' the Prancer whispered. 'Will I ever have a friend like that again?'

Stillness spread from the tree, surrounded him. A thin strand of moonlight traced a path through the branches, touched the ground at his feet. The vision came to him a second time. A human, long red hair framing the pale face. In its wordless way, the part of him tied to the Land was giving him an answer.

The soft thud of hooves against moss raised his head. He blinked, the night suddenly dark again, nostrils expanding as he sought a scent. A voice asked softly, 'May I approach the tree of the Prancer?'

The Prancer straightened. His aunt and milk-mother. 'You are welcome, Malinn.'

She approached slowly, ducking her head in respect to the tree. 'Windrush stands guard over him tonight.'

The Prancer turned his head, unaccustomed to bitterness. 'I should be doing that. I can't do even that right.'

'What else have you done wrong?' She came closer, her horn brushing the low branches. 'No one holds blame against you for Storm's death. He chose to challenge the dragon.'

‘It’s not that.’ The Prancer felt his throat close, had to fight for breath and words. ‘I couldn’t heal him. Maybe if I tried--but I couldn’t.’

‘Whatever you may or may not be,’ Malinn said sensibly, ‘even a full-grown Painter could have done little more than ease his way to death. I have seen a Painter in tears when an injury was beyond her power to cure.’

Malinn had known the last Painter. The Prancer felt her words soothing him, but he fought against the calm. There was still more he had to say. ‘This afternoon, he gave me his second name.’

Malinn sighed. She reached out and nibbled his neck affectionately. ‘I knew he’d choose you as his witness. If only he’d given the name to the Dancer...’

‘In four moons, he’ll return to the Wheel, without completing any steps in this life,’ the Prancer said, repeating as he’d been taught. ‘He asked me to name him. But I’m not a Dancer, either.’ He dug a hoof into the earth. ‘Both and neither.’

‘You are not to blame.’ She sounded grim.

‘Malinn.’ The Prancer hesitated. He was not used to deep thoughts, regrets. The colt which had run laughing into a stream seemed years, not days, ago. Now questions he had never thought to ask were surfacing from some new part of him. ‘Was it my fault my mother died? Because there was just me, not two of us?’

‘Births can go wrong for many reasons,’ Malinn reminded him gently. ‘She had great courage, your dam. She lived long enough to give you the first milk.’

‘But why am I marked with the signs of both Painter and Dancer?’

Malinn studied him for a long moment. The Prancer shrank back against his birth-tree, suddenly aware that he should know. Something hovered just in front of his muzzle, but he was somehow missing it. Deliberately? ‘One day, you will name yourself. For now, I’m grateful that I did not lose both of my sons today.’ Her tone became brisker. ‘I go to speak the happenings to Storm’s tree. Will you come with me?’

‘I could give his name to my sire,’ the Prancer said quickly. ‘Couldn’t he speak over the body?’

‘Not now,’ Malinn said gently. ‘Didn’t you see? The dragon carried part of Storm’s horn away with him, lodged deep in his eye. Only with the horn complete can a unicorn be named.’

The Prancer lowered his head. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said softly. ‘He wouldn’t have died, except for me. He died leading the dragon away from me.’

‘When you were brought to me, first milk still wet upon your muzzle, your mother dead, Storm was nursing. You were crying from hunger, fear, loneliness.’ Her voice took on a note of wonder. ‘Without a word from me, Storm stepped aside to allow you to nurse. From that moment, before you even knew him, he became your protector.’

‘I miss him.’

‘Yes, you will.’ She touched him lightly. ‘Come. Tomorrow the herd will mark his departure. Tonight is for us, his family.’

The Prancer took a deep breath. Then he pushed himself away from his tree, following his milk-mother into the woods.



He stood again by Storm’s birth-tree the next day, afternoon sun slanting through the grove. All the herd was present, most waiting respectfully in the distance, while

those who had truly known the young colt gathered closer by the fresh earth heaped over the oak's roots.

'For a short time he was known again to us,' the Dancer said quietly, beginning the words of the Departure ritual. 'Now he has re-joined his birth self, and both have begun their return to the Wheel. We who celebrated his birth and first name now mark his departure. Let each of us speak our remembrances of him.'

Malinn, as was her right, stepped forward first. 'I remember when he first born to me. Wind and rain raged through these trees, and from that I gave him his first name. But he was unafraid of the groaning of the branches and the lashing of the rain. His courage and trust are what I remember, and in honour of that memory I will run with my stallion again when I am in season. His great spirit moves me to give another the chance to live through my bearing.'

The Dancer nodded as she returned to her place. 'His dam will bear another foal in his honour. He is so remembered.'

A young filly came next, her head hung low in shyness. The Prancer recognised her. Storm had sometimes stood next to her in lessons, whispering in her ear when the Teacher wasn't looking. 'He used to make me laugh,' she said quietly. 'I wasn't any good with learning Human, but he made me laugh and it didn't matter so much. I'll work hard, and become the best Human speaker in the herd.'

'His friend will concentrate on her Human lessons in his honour,' said the Dancer. 'He is so remembered.'

The Prancer watched several more come forward, speak their memories. His turn would come soon, and he didn't know what to say. There was so much in his mind, so much in his heart. Long days running through the grasslands, enjoying the strength of young muscles. The evenings of hide and find in the woods. Apples stolen from the herd tree, all the sweeter for being munched in secret. And the dares, always trying to top the other.

Eyes were fixed on him. The Prancer realised that they were waiting for him. He moved to the brown mound, the heavy scent of fresh soil rising to his nostrils. 'He was my friend,' he said simply, 'and we used to challenge each other. He trusted me with his second name, but the dragon took away part of him, and so he cannot be named now.' He took a deep breath, searching for words. 'He gave me one final dare just before he died, to fight a dragon. I will meet his last challenge. I'll go fight the dragon, and bring back Storm's horn. He will be named before he completes his return to the Wheel.'

Only after he had spoken did he realise the logical outcome of his words. He glanced back at his father. The stallion arched his neck, tail flicking as he stated, 'Storm's milk-brother will leave the First Kingdom to seek out the mountains of the dragons. In his honour, he will fight a dragon, and return with that which was taken from him. He is so remembered.'

Leave. The Prancer returned to his place. Yes. Dragons came only rarely to the First Kingdom. Across the two human kingdoms he would have to wander before he could challenge a dragon to battle.

The vision of the red haired human came back to him, swirling among the dark leaves. Would he meet it on his travels? He looked in the direction of the hills, wondering what he would encounter in the kingdoms of the humans.

## CHAPTER THREE

The day had been hot, the sun burning even through the leaves of the trees, when Fianna first appeared amongst his pigs. Deian always remembered that he had thought her first to be a vision raised by the heat, her long red hair floating around her shoulders like the wings of a fiery angel. But her language was far from holy as she shouted at the bristling dog who barred her way into the forest.

Deian had stopped at the edge of the woods, leaning on his staff as he watched her try to step past Alastair. The dog's head sank lower, the bristling ruff and bared teeth giving her silent warning.

'He will not let you pass,' he told the girl.

She glared at him. 'Is this your cur?'

Deian paused, considering. 'He lives with me, yes.'

'Tell your mongrel to get out of my way.'

'He stops you with good reason.' Deian pointed back at the trees. 'The boar of my herd runs in the woods. The townspeople know that, and they know better than to leave the fields for the trees.'

'A boar, loose in the forest?' She frowned. 'Isn't that dangerous?'

'He doesn't leave the circle I've set for him.' Deian clucked to Alastair, and the dog slipped smoothly to his side. 'You're new here.'

She raised her chin defiantly. 'I've been in Lundern two years, but I've had better things to do than wander through pig muck. How old are you?'

He ran a hand through his hair, wondering if the sun had bleached it from blond to white. 'I'm fourteen years of age.' About the same as her, he judged.

'Then I won't talk to you. Take me to your parents.'

'Mother died when I was young,' Deian said steadily. 'And my father is these two years gone. You may speak either to me, or to Alastair.'

'Alastair?'

Deian nodded to the dog. 'You've already met him.'

'Oh, yes.' Her lip curled. 'Does the grey half-breed have more sense than the blond half-wit?'

Deian sensed amusement from the dog. Alastair liked this human. 'My father, and his father before him, have always bred our dogs with great care. No one breed had that which we looked for. What would you see herding hogs, a lap dog?'

To his surprise, she suddenly laughed. The lines of anger and worry around her eyes, out of place in a girl her age, lifted. Deian smiled in return. She crouched, uncaring that pigs snorted around her. 'Alastair. Hog Herder. No, I couldn't see one of the castle pets in these fields.'

Alastair stepped forward, gravely permitting her to rub his ears. She had a sure way with hounds, Deian noted, her hands easily and quickly checking the teeth in the narrow snout, the strong muscles under the grey curls of the thick coat, the long legs. 'Wolfhound, sheepdog, cattle herder. Am I right?'

Deian nodded. She must work in royal kennels. 'Do you come from the castle?'

'Yes, two years ago.' She stood again, sweeping hair back from her face. 'The King chose a new consort, and I couldn't stay.'

Court intrigues held no interest for Deian. He shrugged. 'And now?'

'I live with the Lady Sallah.'

Indoor or outdoor servant? he wondered. Her clothes, a tunic draped over baggy grey trousers, were rough for either. But then, his father had always told him that the elder sister to the king was 'a strange one.' He had never quite understood the expression, but perhaps having a girl like this for a servant was part of it. 'I am Deian,' he said quietly.

'The town pig herder.' She lifted her feet, stepping carefully over several patches of excrement. 'I'm Fianna.'

Deian awkwardly accepted the offered hand. He had seen nobles using the old gesture of friendship, but had never used it himself. 'What think you to Lundern?'

She shrugged. 'It's a town, like a hundred others. I won't be here forever.'



He had not seen her again for several weeks. The pigs born earlier in the year were at the difficult age when his quiet requests were insufficient to keep them to the agreed portion of woods and fields. Alastair was hard pressed, maintaining control with nips of sharp teeth.

Deian had other responsibilities. Birthing had come hard for some of the forest's residents. Some mothers had survived, with his help, and were soon recovered well enough to return to their kind, their young at their side. But others had died, leaving him to care for the children they left behind. As he had done every summer since his sixth year of life, he raised the young animals. This summer, two fawns, an ocelot kit, and a wolf pup waited his return every evening, restless in the boundaries he had mentally set for them.

Alastair was the first to notice her return. Deian looked up at the dog's quick mental warning, the hound remaining physically silent. He finished his examination of the piglet's inflamed foot, reminding her that she should keep away from plants of red hue. Then he rose, and waited as the girl strode confidently towards him.

'Tell me, is Lundern always so boring?' Fianna asked by way of greeting.

'I don't know,' he answered truthfully. 'I rarely visit the town.'

'I can see why. Nothing to do there.' She tossed her hair back. 'You're the least boring person here.'

Unsure whether she were complimenting or insulting him, Deian chose the safety of a nod. 'I have a leg to bandage.'

'I'll help.' She crouched beside the piglet, reaching out with spread hands. The pig took a single look at this unfamiliar human, then ran squealing between her legs. Knocked off balance, Fianna landed with a loud curse onto the grass. Alastair's jaws opened, his tongue lolling between white teeth as he laughed soundlessly. Then he slipped away, his long strides quickly bringing him level with the panicked creature.

'You scared her,' Deian told Fianna, watching her stand, brushing bits of grass from her clothes.

Fianna gave him a sour glance. 'She was all right with you.'

'Because I spoke to her first.' Alastair was bringing the piglet back to him, encouraging her with nudges from his nose. 'Watch.'

The reluctant pig stopped before him, sides heaving from her run. Deian knelt on the dry grass. As easily as he could have spoken aloud, he sent a tendril of thought into the bright mind. Fear tinged the edges, along with a streak of anger at the dog who had so quickly caught her. Deian wove reassurance around the fear, a note of amusement at her rage. She calmed under the influence.

Deian stood. 'There. See?'

Fianna frowned. 'But you haven't said anything.'

'I have,' Deian said, confused. Alastair had heard his contact with the pig. Why hadn't she?

'I'm not useless with animals, you know,' Fianna continued. 'I've worked a lot with horses. And hounds.'

'Pigs are different. They're more intelligent than horses or dogs. Most dogs.' He excepted Alastair with a glance, and the hound laughed a second time. 'I'll ask her to keep still while you hold her.'

Both pig and girl eyed each other while Deian quietly explained to both what was required of them. With Alastair nearby, ready to chase her again if necessary, the piglet allowed Fianna to spread her hands over the mottled black and pink skin.

Deian glanced at the long fingers as he wrapped cloth around the inflamed leg. Few callouses stood out on the smooth skin. She wasn't a labourer, then. And she had a good grasp on the pig, tight, but not too tight.

Fianna returned the next afternoon. 'Why don't you ever seem glad to see me?' she demanded. 'Do you have other human visitors?'

Deian thought that over. 'No, not human.'

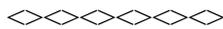
'Are you never lonely?'

Lonely? When was he ever alone? Deian closed his eyes, raising his face to the warm sun. He felt the bright minds of his pigs as they moved through the grass, commenting on the taste of the fungus they had found, the temper of the boar, the strange smell clinging to the human stranger. Further away, the quicksilver thoughts of birds flicked against his consciousness, much less focussed than those of the herd. Weaving through them were the calmer presences of the trees, stretching patient arms to the life-giving sun. And deeper yet was the Land, through and under and surrounding them all, her existence felt both in the quick laughter of streams leaping far beneath the soil, and in the more patient movements of the continental plates. 'No,' he finally answered.

'Then you don't care whether or not I come.'

Living amongst animals had taught him to speak in simple truths. 'So long as it doesn't disturb my pigs.'

Fianna strode away in a huff.



Deian stared at the Strategy board, his forehead creased. Fianna's pieces were clustered into two main groups, one threatening his main city to the south, the second his farmlands to the north. A third, smaller group was clustered by a river deep within his territory, placed there for some purpose for which he couldn't begin to guess. His armies, in contrast, were spread across the grey and green squares. Was that good or bad?

'Come on,' Fianna said impatiently. 'It's your turn.'

She had reappeared several days ago, announcing that she'd forgiven him and that he could help her with her studies. Discovering that he knew nothing about Strategy had only momentarily fazed her. Then she had enthusiastically decided to teach him the rules. He was still confused about the difference between earls and dukes, and why squires couldn't fight as well as knights. Battle, he sensed, was not a natural part of the Land.

Alastair nudged his hand. The hound had taken an interest in the game. He saw the pieces as so many pigs to be rounded up to combat other pigs for grazing rights. The

king, of course, was the herd's dog. At his suggestion, Deian moved several pieces towards the river.

Fianna scowled, always the sign that Deian had made a good move. He felt Alastair smile next to him, thick tail beating the ground. Deian looked up. 'Your turn.'

'Don't rush me, don't rush me.' She leaned forward. One long strand of red hair escaped from behind her ear, colours only slightly darker than the autumn leaves scattered across the grass. Deian glanced away. Soon it would be time to choose which pigs to take to the market.

The quick touch of a cold nose warned Deian first. Something hovered just on the edge of awareness, almost painfully shy. Not daring to turn, least he scare the creature, Deian closed his eyes and borrowed the dog's senses for a moment. The high, almost flowery scent of the creature approaching them was unfamiliar. A small body, covered in thick, black fur, limping as orange blood dripped from a rounded shoulder.

Fianna's mouth was open with surprise when Deian opened his eyes. 'A cherlubar,' she whispered.

So, that's what it was called. He exchanged a look with Alastair. The hound rose. Still linked to the dog's mind, Deian felt Alastair step cautiously over leaves and grass, head held high, unthreatening. His tail waved as he greeted the creature, drawing it closer.

Deian finally dared to twist around. The creature studied him with eyes as deep as the dark pools he had found in the depths of the forest. The mind was just as dark to his tentative probes. For once he was going to have to rely on physical gestures alone to reassure a beast.

'Alastair.' The dog looked up at him, startled to hear his name spoken aloud. 'She's injured. Bring my herb packet.'

The words were for the benefit of the cherlubar. Mentally he impressed the dog's mind with the image of his medical roll, resting on a shelf in their home. Alastair dipped his head, then trotted away.

'A cherlubar,' Fianna said behind him. 'They're not supposed to be real.'

Deian slowly raised his hands, held palm out. The creature was smaller than Alastair. Even kneeling, he towered over its long-snouted head. He extended his arms. The cherlubar trembled once, but allowed him to touch the soft skin with a forefinger.

Physical contact allowed him to sense some of the creature's thoughts. Pain was uppermost, and fear. Above all, he sensed the same mixture of joy and wisdom that came to him from the Land. Deian lowered the other hand to the ground. Taking deep breaths, he merged his thoughts with that of the earth beneath his knees. The Land was the link he needed.

The cherlubar's mind stilled. Deep eyes looked up at Deian, unafraid and trusting. Deian held the gaze until Alastair returned, resting the roll beside him. Carefully flicking back the cloth, Deian removed several packets of dried herbs. Bloodwort, to slow the flow of bleeding. Feverdew would protect against infection.

'We should take it back to the town,' Fianna said as he worked. 'Show that they exist.'

The creature relaxed as his fingers spread crushed blackroot along the skin, numbing the pain. The small appendages which grew from the shoulders coiled back against the muscles. 'What would that serve?'

'When a cherlubar appears to someone, it means that they have a great destiny. Don't you want to know about it?'

‘Maybe the destiny’s yours.’

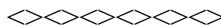
He felt the flash of stiff pride. ‘I already know what mine is.’

‘Then you don’t need her.’ Deian finished cleaning the edges of the wound. Made by a trap, by the signs of it. He would have to go into the woods tonight and destroy the devices. Not only for the sake of the wild creatures. One of his pigs was just as likely to wander into the metal jaws.

Alastair moved off with the cherlubar, supporting her back to the woods. Deian would have liked to care for her a few days, but he knew she would not permit it. She needed the dark places between the trees as much as he needed the feel of earth beneath his feet.

That night, when Fianna was long returned to her own place and he was lying on the pallet in his small hut, he wondered about the cherlubar. He had known that they existed, of course, not needing physical sightings to confirm the quick skipping of their alien thoughts through the many textured weavings of the forest’s life. Nor was he surprised that one should choose to come to him. But what did worry him was that a cherlubar could step into a trap in the first instance. A trap of crude steel, alien to the Land and which one of her children should have been able to avoid.

Sensing his friend’s concern in his sleep, Alastair breathed noisily, then awoke. He padded over to the bed, thrusting his nose into Deian’s cheek. He raised a hand and scratched the soft fur behind the long ears. The woods and fields were filled with the slow decay of autumn, preparing for the siege of winter. But there was a dying beyond that of the season. He had felt it first a few years ago, and ignored it, as he did all things he did not understand. Now it was becoming more and more obvious. And he didn’t know what to do about it.



‘Tell me how you do it.’

Deian looked up from his carving. His fingers rested on the wood which was slowly taking on the outlines of a pig. ‘Do what?’

Fianna’s hands were on her hips as she stared down at him. A wind was churning clouds through the bright sky, and it whipped her long hair around her face. ‘Talk to animals without using your voice.’

‘I’ve always been able to do it.’ Until he had met Fianna, he had assumed everyone could.

‘Only mages can. And you’re not a mage.’ She added, ‘You’re just a pig herder.’

Deian shrugged, seeing nothing wrong with that. He resumed his carving and his own thoughts. That morning he had chosen which of the hogs would go the market tomorrow, and as usual the experience had left him drained. Unlike a sheep, who could be kept for her wool, or a cow, who could provide milk, there was only one use for a pig. He had to pay the rent for the use of the forest, new boots would be needed before winter, and his overcoat was becoming threadbare. But that did not stop him from mourning the necessity of their sacrifice.

Fianna dropped down beside him. Today she wore a long skirt, which she smoothed around her with irritated pats. ‘Come on, show me.’

Deian slid his knife into its sheath, knowing that she would not leave until she was satisfied. ‘I’ll call Alastair to me. Listen.’

The dog was pacing the boundaries of their land within the forest. His nose and ears were actively searching out the whereabouts of the boar, with whom he had only

an uneasy truce. Deian smiled at Alastair's eager willingness to leave off searching for the boar and greet Fianna instead. The dog found her much more attractive.

A few minutes later Alastair bounded across the dying grasses. His coat was thickening with the onset of winter, making him appear even larger. Tail sweeping from side to side, he marched up to Fianna, his jaws open in laughter.

'Doesn't he ever bark?' she asked, rubbing his head.

Deian fed Alastair the question, then translated the answer. 'He's never found the need.'

'You did it again. You talked to him.'

Alastair made a wry comment, and Deian smiled. He said, almost shyly, 'He likes you very much. I think, one day, he might leave here with you.'

Fianna drew back. 'I wouldn't take him. He's your dog.'

Deian shook his head. 'You make it sound as if I own him.'

'Don't you?'

'As little as I own the moons. The pigs are mine.' He touched the dog's grey coat gently. 'Alastair has decided to be with me, and assist me with the hogs. But we are friends. He's free to leave, should he ever wish to.'

'You should always make sure of what you own.' Then Fianna scowled. 'You changed the subject. Teach me how to call him without speaking.'

Deian hesitated, unsure if the awareness were something which could be taught. At her urging, he tried to make her understand that everything on the Land was interconnected. Plants grew from the soil, animals ate the vegetation, and other animals ate the grazers. The Land provided life to all, both to her own children, and those she had adopted.

'Adopted?' Fianna repeated sharply. 'What do you mean?'

He shrugged helplessly. 'Some, like the cherlubar, were always here. We came afterwards, humans, dogs, pigs, birds, horses. Dragons and unicorns.'

'Then where did we come from?'

The Land had once tried to answer that for him. Confused impressions of metal scarring earth with its sudden impact, a sudden outpour of energy, new beings with only four limbs striding across the ground. The Land had already been alive, but something had surged across her at the moment, giving her new awareness, new focus. Deian answered simply, 'I don't know.'

Alastair stood patiently as Fianna's forehead creased in concentration. She did not need Deian to tell her that she was achieving nothing. 'Oh, this is stupid!' she finally said, jumping to her feet.

Deian cocked his head. 'Alastair feels that you think too much. You won't still your mind.'

'Well, I've got lots to think about.' She leaned down to pat the dog.

Something gold and red tumbled from her shirt, swinging on a long chain. Deian rose to his own feet, startled by the power he felt in the object. 'What's that?'

'Mine.' Fianna quickly slid the ring out of sight.

'It's no more yours than Alastair's mine.' Deian shook his head. The Land had recognised the ring, and her sudden thrust of hope was confusing him. 'And it's not complete.'

'There are two more parts.' She straightened. 'I'll find them.'

'Care when you have them.' He spoke slowly. The Land was communicating through him, and he had to translate her images into the imprecision of words. 'The three together are a thing of power.'

Fianna shrugged the warning away. 'What do you know? You're just a pig herder.'

As she ran back across the fields to town, Deian found himself wondering if she were really the servant he had thought her to be. Or was she something more?



Autumn and winter passed without Deian seeing Fianna again. His days were full, especially once the snows had bound him, dog, and pigs to his small house. The stocks of food he had stored were ample to feed them all, and between the bodies of thirty creatures and the large fire the well-built walls kept them all warm. As with the winters since his father's death, he spent much of his days in a half-sleep. Borrowing energy from the minds of the pigs and the willing Alastair, his mind ranged far across the Four Kingdoms.

What he found worried him even more. There was some trouble with the First Kingdom, that of the unicorns. Although he did not understand all of their rituals, he sensed the missing element. The dragons, the Second Kingdom high in their mountain caves, were finding that they could not always exit the time streams in the place and hour of their choosing. Only the humans of the Third and Fourth Kingdoms appeared unconcerned. They seemed unaware that fewer and fewer mages were being born, that the power once exercised in the highest places of learning was now dwindling to memory.

Deian returned to himself each evening. Preoccupied with his concerns, he sometimes placed Alastair's nut cakes in front of the pigs, and gave their dried fungus to the hound. They merely swapped food dishes behind him, unconcerned so long as there was sufficient for all. Alastair made sure that Deian had a share of his own stores.

'Magic,' Deian finally said to the dog one evening, the solemnity of his words making him speak aloud as well as direct to Alastair's mind. 'That's what's happening. Magic's disappearing from the Land. I wonder what's being done about it?'



Summer came before Deian saw Fianna again. She strode through the pig herd one overcast day, taller than he last remembered her. 'I've had the most boring lesson today,' she said, dropping to the ground near him as if she had never been away. 'Cross-stitching. Can you imagine that? Why do I need to know how to stitch?'

Deian silently called one of the piglets over. He lifted a pink ear to show a thin red line across the back of the head, neat stitches of dark thread closing the lips of the wound.

'All right, maybe it has some use,' she admitted grudgingly.

She continued to rattle on about her lessons in geography and how cold the house had been during the winter. Deian found himself smiling as he listened, only now realising that he'd missed her visits.

Summer went and autumn came, his mornings spent tending to the needs of his herd, the afternoons playing on the flute his father had left him, or carving as Fianna lectured him in the intricate games of military strategy. 'I'm going to be a knight,' she told him one day.

He lowered his flute, fingers rubbing the aged wood. 'We're not at war with anyone.'

‘We will be.’ She tossed her head back, as she always did when arguing. ‘The Third Kingdom wants our lands. That’s what the Lady Sallah told me. We have to be ready to defend ourselves. You don’t seem interested,’ she said sharply.

Caught in the act of raising the flute to his lips, Deian shrugged. ‘It has nothing to do with me.’

‘Of course it does.’ She snorted. ‘Do you think even a pig herder can hide from battle? When war comes, it affects everyone.’

‘Then,’ he said gravely, ‘we should try not to war.’

‘You don’t understand.’ She waved it away. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll protect you.’

Deian smiled. ‘Thank you.’

Hearing the near-sarcasm, Fianna drew herself up straight. ‘What do you think I am?’

‘One of Lady Sallah’s servants.’

‘But I’m--’ Fianna cut off suddenly. She glanced away. Deian felt something go through her, a struggle between two parts of herself. Human minds were always trickier to read than those of animals, so he merely waited. Finally something hardened her face. ‘Yes, I suppose I am her servant, in a way.’

The ghost of a presence prevented him from asking further questions. He slid the flute into his shirt, then stood, waiting. The cherlubar stepped gingerly from the forest, limping, although the wound was long healed. The small, pink appendages attached to the shoulders were coiling and uncoiling, reflecting the agitation he sensed in the deep mind.

‘What’s she doing here?’ Fianna breathed.

Deian was already moving to the creature’s side. He knelt within touch of the fragile head, trying to open his mind as far as possible. The alien thoughts brushed over the surface, too different to grasp fully. Something was in the woods, something strong and dangerous. The cherlubar had been sent to him for help.

Even this much communication had raised an ache between Deian’s eyes. He rose, rubbing his forehead. The cherlubar flicked a hairless tail, then turned, looking back to make sure he followed.

He was led deeper and deeper into the forest, the trees thickening until the weave of branches plunged the space beneath into dark shadow. The cherlubar almost disappeared into the blackness, and she had to retrieve him several times. As they neared the sound of a small waterfall, however, he began to sense the being which had frightened the creatures of the woods. The cherlubar faded into the shadows, and he stepped into the small clearing alone.

A dragon stood in the pool formed just beyond the splashing of the waterfall. He had braced his legs on the rocky lining so he could hold his right eye in the liquid. Blood oozed from a deep wound, colouring the water to a shade only slightly lighter than the muted scales. This close, Deian could sense his thoughts, running together in a rush of anger and pain.

Something bobbed on the surface of the thickening water. Deian moved closer. The objects were fish, their bodies white and sickly. He followed the flow of the water from the pool, noting that the plants which grew along the edge of the stream were beginning to blacken and die. This was why he had been brought here. The dragon’s blood was poisoning the woods.

Deian studied the beast, wondering what he could do. Unlike unicorns, whose sense of honour and honesty flared brightly in the minds he had touched, dragons recognised no loyalties to any creed or cause beyond Family. Pointing out that the

dragon was destroying the water supplies for a town would most likely bring nothing more than an uncaring laugh.

Slowly pulling the flute from his shirt, Deian raised it to his lips and began a soft tune. He watched the ear free of water twitch, then swivel in his direction. With a groan, the dragon raised his head. Water and blood dripped from what remained of the right eye. The dragon's thoughts became more focussed. He would destroy this merry piper, and drop his head back into the cooling water.

Deian stopped playing. 'The water only eases the pain,' he said calmly. 'It won't cure the wound.'

The dragon decided the human was a fool to assume that a member of the Family spoke Human. The best condition for a fool was death. The long head swung towards him, left eye blinking as he focussed on Deian.

'I know you understand me.' Deian strode forward, stopping a few yards away from the glowing orb. The smell of festering flesh from the damaged eye made his stomach churn. 'And I know you can speak.'

'It's a dragon,' Fianna said suddenly, some distance behind him.

Deian's hands curled, nails pressing hard against skin. Without turning his head, he said, 'Leave, or I will tell Alastair to take you away.'

'Let her stay.' The dragon climbed onto the bank, towering over Deian. Water dripped from the jaws, splashing just beyond his boots. The serpentine neck coiled back upon itself as the dragon raised his head. He lowered his snout in a brief, mocking bow. 'Fianna.'

'What do you want here?' she said tightly. 'The Second and Fourth Kingdoms are allies.'

'I soak my eye.' His tail slapped loudly against the water. 'The pool was once touched by unicorn horn.'

Deian walked past the long body and ran fingers through the mottled water. 'You lie,' he told the dragon. 'The horn was brought with you. Any pool your eye touches would give you ease. But it won't heal you.'

'What will?'

Deian carefully wiped his hand free of dragon blood, the skin already tingling. 'The piece of horn in your eye has to be removed. Only then will the wound begin to close.'

The dragon waited until Deian stood in front of him before speaking again. 'If you help me, you will regret it.' The emerald eye looked beyond him at Fianna. 'Do you wish to tell him why I know this?'

'Because,' Deian said quietly, 'dragons are but loosely bound by time.'

'Do you know that for yourself? Or do you merely repeat what has been told to you?' The eye blinked. 'Come and see.'

Another blink, and Deian was drawn into the glimmering depths. The impact of the complex mind made his own nerves scream with pain. A complex labyrinth of thoughts uncoiled around him, even time transparent to their workings. Yesterday the dragon had been wounded, and this morning he had slipped back nine months. Following the time streams was as simple as choosing a path through a forest.

*You lie*, He told the dragon. Even the two words were a struggle to press against the flow of consciousness crushing Deian. *It used to be that simple. But not anymore.*

That he could force a thought of his own startled the dragon. As the beast sought to recover his control, Deian reached out a hand, clutched at the dirt beneath his body. Dragon magic was not the same as the Land's magic. They were not even adopted

children. Deian called on the Land, seeking her touch through the mud squeezing between his chilled fingers.

Forest and water swirled back into existence around him. He took a deep, ragged breath of air, unsurprised to find his cheek pressed against the gritty sand at the pool's edge. The quiet awareness of the Land hovered around him a moment longer, touching him with a quick caress. Then her presence dissipated, merging once again with the ground.

Deian tried to stand. Alastair was instantly beside him, lending him a strong shoulder. Wiping his eyes, Deian found blood mingled with tears. His ears were ringing, and only after shaking his head did he realise that Fianna was arguing with the dragon.

'You have only one part of that pretty bauble,' said the dragon. 'And neither the knowledge nor the strength to use it even if it were complete.'

As his vision cleared, Deian found the trees ringed by creatures of the forest. Birds weighed down tree branches, cherlubar, deer, and animals for which he had no names watched from the shadows. Sent by the Land at his call for help. The dragon turned a half-lidded eye to him. 'I had thought you weak, little man. But I will remember your protector, when next we meet.'

Deian straightened. Feeling was slowly returning to numbed muscles. A part of him marvelled at Fianna's lack of fear, facing a creature twice as large as a warhorse, and far more deadly. 'At the moment, you need my help.'

Blood was beginning to flow again from the damaged eye, swelling from the deep wound to drip darkly onto the sands. 'If you heal me, you will one day lose that which you most love.'

'If I do not,' Deian pointed out, 'you will poison forest, field, and town. I can't allow that.'

The dragon chuckled. 'The Land has found her Champion.'

Deian nodded, slowly, sensing that he had received his answer. He drew his knife from its sheath. 'Rest your head along the ground.'

The dragon obeyed, commenting, 'Battlefield surgery. Be gentle, or I might tear off your arm.'

Alastair had disappeared, searching through the tree roots for a glowing fungus which Deian often used. He returned now, lips carefully peeled back from the astringent toadstool. 'Why don't you stop yourself from being wounded?' Deian asked, propping a foot against the fungus as he drew steel through the stem. Liquid stained the bright metal, cleaning the blade. 'Ride the time stream to warn yourself of this outcome.'

The dragon chuckled a second time. 'There are many possibilities. But some events must happen, and this is one of those if the Family is to exist.'

'But the Family has always existed,' Fianna said, sounding confused.

'Not in every possibility. And we must ensure this possibility.'

Fianna stared at him. 'You're not what I expected.'

'And you,' said the dragon, tone low and menacing, 'will you tell the Land's Champion who you truly are?'

Deian straightened, ready. His muscles were already beginning to stiffen with the aftereffect of the dragon's mental invasion. 'Hold still.'

'He means, hold your tongue,' Fianna muttered to the dragon.

The dragon's other eye closed, and he sighed heavily. Deian moved close to the large head, as high as his waist, though the lower jaw was resting on mud. The eye socket was as large as two outspread palms, and ravaged by a long deep wound. The

source of the infection was embedded in the raw flesh. The silver curls were untainted by the black blood oozing along the short shaft.

Deian tightened both hands around the leather-wrapped hilt of his knife. The dragon shuddered, once, as he eased the cold metal along the side of the piece of horn. The pure silver twisted away from the blade's steel, freeing a passage for the dagger. Deian slowly worked the steel deeper and deeper, his hands moving to the rounded end of the hilt as he tried to avoid the blood moving down the metal.

Unicorn horn sung a high note of protest as steel tip finally ground against silver. Deian threw his weight to one side, flipping the blade against the end of the horn. For a moment, the obstacle held. Then the piece of horn was flung free, Deian dropping the knife and skipping to one side as a fresh flow of blood followed the removal. The tip bounced along the ground, finally dropping into the pool.

The dragon raised his head, sand and mud churning under his silver claws as he turned. He thrust the eye back into the water. The pool shimmered, silver spreading across the surface, mingling with the blood. When the dragon lifted his head free, the wound was still raw, but sealed. Behind him the water was pure again. Only the gently bobbing remains of dead fish marked the former poison.

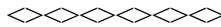
He tilted his head and focused the remaining eye on Fianna. 'When you meet me for the third time,' the dragon said mildly, 'remind me that unicorn hunting is a dangerous pastime. The horn is for you to carry. I had hoped for an entire length, but three inches should do.'

'Should do for what?' she asked suspiciously.

The dragon winked. 'Possibilities. All possibilities.'

With a roar of wind and flung wings, the dragon leapt from the pool. Water and sand fell from his claws, griming Deian's tunic even further. Birds scurried desperately out of his path. The dragon laughed, his tail sweeping through the flocks, his claws tearing more bodies from the sky. Deian watched as feathers and blood dropped through the trees. He felt a wrench deep within the air, and the dragon shifted into another time stream.

Birds fell in soft bundles around him. Slowly, his muscles aching, Deian moved among them, collecting those he could hope to nurse back to health, wringing the necks of those beyond help. Fianna followed behind him, cradling those few he had selected in her arms. Then, even Fianna quiet for once, they made their way back to the fields.



A cold nose pressed against Deian's ear. He woke slowly, his mind returning from far reaches of the Land. Above him, the gyrfalcon which insisted on resting on the bed's headboard ruffled her feathers as Alastair nudged him again.

The urgency in the dog's mind brought Deian to his feet. He reached for his clothes, stuffing stiff legs into trousers as Alastair pressed an image into his consciousness. Fianna. He had found Fianna, alone in the forest.

Deian drew a thick tunic over his shoulders, stamped his feet into boots. Pigs shuffled out of his way as he strode across the room, Alastair eager at his heels. Flurries of snow drifted onto the wooden floor as he opened the door, the chill biting his nose. Almost as an afterthought, he pulled a coat from a peg, draping it around him.

A white mantle several inches thick blurred the outlines of the clearing, thinning slightly as they went under the trees. Alastair's broad paw prints marked the snow

several times, fresh over the older marks of other animals. He led Deian directly into the woods, ears flicking back impatiently at the slower progress of a two legged creature over that with four.

Fianna was standing by a tree, hands buried into coat sleeves as she leaned against the thick trunk. Alastair broke away, hurrying to her side. Without turning around, she said, 'I told him not to tell you. I'll be going back in a moment.'

Her voice was low and flat, missing its usual spark. Deian rubbed his face, chin rough from the beginnings of a beard. He glanced at the darkening sky, the cold promise of more snow on the wind. 'It'll be night soon, and the snow hides many landmarks. I will take you back to the town--'

'I don't need rescuing.'

'Or I could offer you shelter for the night.'

'I don't need anything from you,' Fianna snapped. 'I can take care of myself.'

He wondered why humans were so difficult to read. 'At the moment, under my roof reside a dozen birds, thirty pigs, two deer, a young wolf, and a hedgehog. Should they be welcome and a human turned away?'

She turned slowly, a small smile tugging at her lips. 'I think that's the longest I've ever heard you talk for.'

There was something else behind that smile. He might not be able to read it, but Alastair could, and his tail beat reassuringly against her legs. I will lose him to her one day, Deian found himself thinking. And he could not blame the hound. 'I have a fire in the hearth.'

Fianna waited a moment, head bent as she considered. Then she nodded. In formal response to the traditional invitation of hospitality, she said, 'May the fire light the hearts as well as the bodies of those who dwell therein.'

He held open the door to his hut to first let out the pigs and the creatures in his care. Unlike Alastair, they had neither the knowledge nor the tall hound's reach to undo the latch themselves. Then he welcomed Fianna inside. She hesitated just beyond the door, studying the small room. 'All the beasts spend the winter in here with you?'

'It would be too cold outside.' He unlaced his boots and slipped into a pair of indoor shoes. Beyond the bed was a small closet, out of which he pulled a second pair of the fur lined slippers.

'Doesn't smell as much as I would've expected.'

As ever, her frank honesty pleased him. He handed her the shoes, and she exchanged them for her boots. 'I let them out thrice daily.'

He took the half-dozen strides to the fire. Having a guest under his roof called for more than the usual winter rations, and he pulled from storage jars handfuls of dried vegetables and fungi, adding them to water in a small cauldron over the fire. He measured blood-warming spices into the broth, and took a deep, appreciative sniff as the high scent wafted through the room. It had the added effect of removing traces of animal fur and bird dust.

'How long have you lived here?' Fianna asked. In the oversize shoes she shuffled to the small table, taking a seat in one of the chairs.

'My father built this place to prove his suit for my mother's hand.' Deian touched one of the mud-thatched walls with real affection. 'They lived here happily, and I with them, until she died and we two lived here alone.'

'My mother too died, when I was young.'

Deian met her gaze, felt a flash of understanding between them. 'When she died,' he said solemnly, 'my father said to me, "The Land will be a mother to you now."'

‘The city was mine.’ She accepted the mug of warm tea he handed her, leaves and pieces of root slowly sinking as they stained the water. ‘The city of kings and queens, the heart of the Fourth Kingdom. Secundus, where magic roams the streets so that whole quarters change from one day to the next. When I left her...’ Fianna’s voice faltered, and she took a deep drink of tea, straining the leaves through the mesh on one lip of the mug.

Deian bent to the fire, adding logs to stoke up the warmth. In this, they were opposites, he knew. He spoke rarely, but when he did, it was always from the heart. Fianna never seemed to cease talking, but rarely was it about anything of importance. Now, for once, she was speaking from a deep part of herself. Allowing her a moment of silence, he went to the door, letting his charges back into the house. A few of the pigs snuffled at their guest, but most settled by the warmth of the fire, grunting happily.

‘I was heartsore to leave her gates,’ Fianna continued finally, in a voice so low that it only just carried above the crackling of the flames. ‘But I always expected to return, one day. But now--’ She bit her lip.

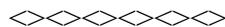
The broth was ready. Deian filled three bowls, setting one down for Alastair, and carrying the other two over to the small table. They ate in silence. A wind had started outside, blowing snow against the sides of the house. The trees turned most of it aside for Deian, and the strong mix of timber and mud withstood the rest.

‘You don’t ask many questions, do you?’ Fianna said, her voice short of mocking.

Deian shrugged. ‘Everything comes of its own time. Seeds come only steadily to harvest, a piglet must have its months of nursing, trustworthiness must be proved to a hound--’

He stopped. Fianna had turned her head away. Her loose hair slid down her shoulders, glinting in the firelight. With a start, Deian realised that she was near adult now, and beautiful, the hair framing a long, elegant face. ‘I can’t go home, now,’ she said quietly. ‘News has come to the Lady Sallah this day. The King’s consort is with child. No one would welcome me back to Secundus. Sallah was right. I can never go home again.’

Deian had no understanding of politics, or what a servant might do to so displease the wife of a king. But he did know something about mourning. He rose softly from his seat. Even as he had seen his father do for his mother years before, after the death of his brother, he gently turned Fianna’s head to his chest so that she would not have to cry uncomforted.



Fianna said no more. He gave her his bed, and lowered himself down along the fire, Alastair curling at his side. In the morning she said that she wished to return to the town. Knowing better than to offer his help, he merely pulled on boots and cloak to accompany her. Alastair reluctantly remained behind to care for the other animals, merely pressing his face against hers for a moment.

‘He will follow you, one day,’ Deian said as they started across the snow-lined fields.

‘He’s your dog.’

Deian shook his head, wondering why she felt such a need to possess things. ‘He is his own.’

Their boots crunched into the fresh snow for a few minutes in companionable silence. Deian didn't expect it to last, and he was unsurprised when Fianna spoke again. 'That dragon. He won't feel any gratitude for what you did, you know.'

Deian smiled. 'I know. Dragons are only obligated to the Family.'

'And how do you know so much about dragons?'

'I have touched their minds.' A question tugged at his own lips, and he gave in reluctantly. 'Do you still have the piece of horn?'

'Here.' She tapped her chest. 'In a pouch of mage's cloth. The cloth is specially charged to keep others from sensing such a thing of magic.'

'Even the one it is meant for?'

'It's meant for me,' Fianna said fiercely. 'You heard what the dragon said. He got it for me.'

That was not what Deian had understood, but he shrugged away an argument.

The town was quiet, the greatest life coming from smoke rising dark from chimneys above snow-whitened roofs. Deian would have walked around to the servant's entrance of the large mansion, as he did when he paid his rent. But Fianna walked boldly up the steps to the main entrance and knocked loudly on the door.

Sallah herself answered, pulling the thick oak frame back so suddenly that Fianna almost fell inside. Deian knew the older woman, since it was into her strong hands that he placed gold coins every autumn. Her green eyes were cold with anger. 'Where have you been?' she demanded of Fianna.

Fianna looked down at her feet. 'In the forest.'

'All night?'

'No. Deian gave me hospitality.'

Deian felt the hostile gaze rake over him. 'I trust,' Sallah said warningly, 'that you took precautions. I'll not have her fall pregnant.'

For a moment, Deian did not understand. Then he did, and a flush crept up his neck. 'Lady,' he said gravely, 'I have not even yet cut a beard for the first time.'

'And I'm getting cold,' Fianna protested.

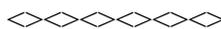
Sallah stood aside, allowing her to pass through the door. Then she was back again, looking down the steps at Deian. He stood still, unconcerned by her scrutiny. 'You're not afraid of me.'

Deian smiled slightly. He had met more fearful dragons than her. 'Should I be?'

'Enough are. More would be, if I had ascended to the Dragon Throne, mine by right...' Her eyes had unfocussed. Deian waited patiently, his feet growing cold even in his fur-lined boots, until her thoughts returned to the man at her door. 'I am thankful that you brought Fianna back to this door, and I will not forget it,' she said crisply. 'I have a fire in the hearth.'

'Your presence is enough warmth,' he said in the traditional decline. 'I must return to those in my care.'

She waited until his boots were upon the road again before shutting the door.



When the spring thaws came, Deian carefully shaved the scraggly beard which had grown during the winter. As he had promised his father, he buried the handful of light hairs in the earth near the unmarked grave. The woods were silent with respect as he rose from his task, brushing the soil from his hands. He was a man now, able to inherit lands, ride into war, and ask a woman to marriage.

Yes, now, marriage. Fianna was his age. Even now, she should have cut her long hair back to the short locks of a newly-mature woman. She was old enough to hear his proposal, and to accept or decline as she wished.

And he did want to ask her. As he set about the tasks of spring, repairing the walls of his house, sending the sows in turn to the boar, and searching out the herbs which only flowered this time of year, he found his resolve firming. They were a good match, a talker and a listener, even as his parents had been. He could withstand her flashes of anger, perhaps even lessen them. She was sunlight to his earth, each needing the other to bring forth life. And she herself had said that she had no place to return to, caused for whatever reason by the pregnancy of the King's second wife. Why not stay here with him, bringing her own skills with animals to help him in his work?

Above all, and to his great surprise, he had come to love her.

Alastair shifted with unease when Deian confided his plans to the hound. But he either would not, or could not, explain, though the hound looked out across the fields for her return as often as he himself did. In the meantime, Deian found out the bracelet his father had given to his mother on their betrothal, and carried it with him in a pocket.

So it was with the unaccustomed leap of fear that he saw her finally come across the fields one soft morning, dew darkening her boots as she strode through the grasses. Her red hair clung to her head, scarcely covering her ears. She smiled shyly as Deian came to his feet.

'I've brought the Strategy board,' she said, her free hand self-consciously patting her short hair. 'Can you free Alastair for a game?'

The hound had already warned the pigs with pushes from his muzzle, and was now trotting over to join them. Deian had laid a cloth across the moist ground, and Fianna knelt on a corner to spread out the colourful map. Alastair took his seat beside Deian, ears pricking forward as he turned his attention to the game.

Several hours later, the sun high in the sky and Fianna's army surrounded, she surrendered her king with laughter. 'Pity you're nothing more than a hound,' she told Alastair. 'You would out-fox many a high ranking knight.'

The dog's tail thumped, recognising the compliment. Deian ruffled the grey coat, thinking once again how much Fianna seemed to belong out here, at home with the sun and the wind. He looked forward to her hair growing out again, braided in the style of a woman. Fingering the bracelet in his pocket, he stood slowly. 'Fianna.'

She looked up at him, laughter dying away. Then she stood as well, brushing creases from her trousers. 'Yes?'

'I think we like each other well enough, you and I.' He stumbled a little over his words, wishing that speech were not so awkward for him. And fighting the sudden feeling that she might be a creature of fire and wind, but not earth, nor water, the two elements which were more of his affinity. 'I ask you to consider putting your hand to mine before witnesses, and coming under my roof to live.'

There, he had said it. Greatly daring, he looked up at her. Her face had gone very still, as if listening to more than his words. 'You mean, marry you?'

'Yes.' He took a deep breath. 'Think upon it. And have this as a hope-promise.' The bracelet glittered as he pulled it free, gold links twisting in the sunlight. Mute for once, she watched him clasp it around her left wrist, bright against her pale skin.

Whatever she might have said in response was lost in the heavy thuds of hooves against drying grassland. Deian straightened, felt Alastair come alert beside him. The sun picked out the gleam of well-worn armour when the knight was still a good

distance off. Even Deian recognised the banner flying from a mailed hand. The red and gold of the royal family of the Fourth Kingdom, a golden dragon outlined against a blood red background.

Fianna had swallowed loudly at first seeing the approaching horseman. Her arms dropped limply to her sides. Only when the rider was close enough for them to see that the silk was fringed with the gold tassels which marked a member of the royal family did she take a deep breath. Suddenly she stood taller on the ground, a new confidence lifting her shoulders. Deian took a step back to study her closer. Something was wrong here, very wrong. He felt Alastair press close against his leg, as if to offer comfort.

The knight brought his gelding within feet of them. Bit clanked against teeth as he reined the grey to a halt. The horse's nostrils flared at the scent of pigs nearby, and the heavy body danced sideways. The knight jerked again at the red reins, stilling his mount. He stared down at Fianna for a moment. Then he offered her the banner, which she took with trembling hands. As the breeze snapping the silk above her head, the knight swung from his horse and went to one knee before her. 'Your Highness, I bring news from Secundus. The King is dead, and his get from his second wife is yet unborn. For all intents and purposes, you are his heir. Will you return with me to the city to prove your claim?'

Was this what Alastair had sensed? Fianna was not a servant girl. For reasons he'd had no interest in understanding, she had come to Lundern. And now she could return to the city she loved. Deian watched her, wondering what she would do now.

'I must go.' Fianna turned her head to him. 'I was born to sit on the Dragon Throne.'

Deian bent his head, sensing that she wanted to be happy, yet was not. 'Go to your city. Rejoice.'

'Yes. Yes, I will.' The bracelet flashed as she put a hand to the knight's mailed shoulder. 'Arwan, my aunt. Has she been told?'

Arwan nodded. 'She is preparing to follow, even now.'

'Then let us go.' As the knight mounted, Fianna glanced at Deian. Her right hand touched the hope-promise, but made no move to unclasp it. Without a word, she allowed Arwan to give her hand up onto the horse to sit behind him on the broad back.

As they started off, Alastair shifted restlessly at Deian's side. He glanced down at the hound, saw the indecision in the deep black eyes. 'Go,' he told Alastair quietly. 'Keep her safe for me.'

The hound reared up on his hind legs, placing forepaws briefly on Deian's shoulders. A wet tongue left behind a hope-promise of its own. Then he was gone, his long strides bringing him quickly even with the warhorse. Deian stood and watched them leave, until they were nothing more than a bright smudge on the horizon. Then he went into the forest, seeking the calm reassurance of the Land.

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