

The Temptation of Dragons

Chapter One

‘Vicar arrested for drunk driving’ is not the sort of headline my bishop wants to read about his priests. So I slowed down my Ford as I saw the flashing lights of the police car ahead. An accident. I hunched low over the steering wheel, hoping to hide the tell tale sign of the dog collar around my neck. My wine-sweetened breath wafted back into my face, reminding me of the reason I must not stop to offer any assistance. I was pretty certain that I was not over the drink drive limit, but possibly very close.

I risked a guilty glance as I passed the accident site. The black Mercedes had come to rest on the hard shoulder, right up against the traffic barrier. The front was caved in, although I couldn’t see what had caused the damage. No other car was nearby, and as far as I could see none of the trees had wandered across the dual carriageway. Two people stood near the police. Neither looked injured. I let out a sigh of relief.

I pulled back into the slow lane. A moment’s inattention made me drift onto the hard shoulder. The car’s front wheels and rear wheels bumped over an obstruction which shuddered and crunched. My throat closed and my heart pounded fast and quick in my chest. I slammed to stop, pulled up the hand brake and ripped my keys from the ignition. The car lurched against the clutch. I stumbled out and hurried back, terrified that I’d run over some animal or, please God Almighty no, a human.

My foot tripped against something solid. I staggered, and my hand slapped against scaly hide. Hide? The shape solidified under and around me. A tail. I was touching the base of a tail. I looked back at the webbed red tip, the scales, the thin spines. Then I lifted my eyes to see a thick body, two legs splayed back towards me, long leathery wings flung away from the road and over the traffic barrier. I forced myself to walk towards the front legs. My mind kept trying to reject the word forcing itself into my consciousness. Dragon. I was looking at a dragon.

For some reason a sense of disappointment crawled over me. The dragon was smaller than any I’d ever held in my imagination, about twice the size of a large horse. From the amount of blood that was pooling around the heaving chest, it was dying. The blood was only a shade darker than the bright red scales.

I stopped beside the narrow head. One large eye opened and looked up at me. Even in the dying light of a summer’s evening I could see that it was reptilian, the narrow pupil black against a wide iris of shimmering green. For a moment I saw myself mirrored on the clear surface, dark hair askew around my frowning face. The jaws cracked open, and a blue tongue slithered from the rows of small sharp teeth.

‘Father?’

I swallowed against my automatic correction. This was not the time to discuss the best way to address a female priest. ‘Can I help you?’

‘I’m dying.’

‘I could call an ambulance...’ I stopped. Had someone slipped something into my wine? Was I really thinking of arranging medical care for a dragon?

‘No time.’ His voice was fading. ‘Father, will you hear my confession? And give me the last rites?’

‘I’ll get my bag,’ I said. My legs felt rubbery as I stumbled back to the car. What if, I wondered, I were hallucinating a dragon, and it really was a human lying on the

ground? The briefcase I use for hospital visiting sat on the back seat. I carried it back to the dragon, then knelt beside the fluttering nostrils. Best to do this properly. I placed the purple stole around my neck, then lifted out the order of service. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Dominic is my religious name in the Order of Saint Thomas. But my hatch name was Endre.’

‘Brother Dominic, our friend Endre,’ I said, forcing my voice to remain steady, ‘the Bible reminds us that “Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” and “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” Let’s share together the prayer our Lord taught us. Our Father, who art in heaven...’

The dragon joined in, quietly but firmly, a Welsh lilt to his voice. When they had finished, he added, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. I’ve not been a very good monk, and you know I’ve found celibacy difficult. I particularly repent about Miranda. But for all that I’ve done, and all that I’ve left undone, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

I lowered my free hand onto the dragon’s snout. The scales were warm, and smooth, utterly unlike the skin of a snake. ‘God, the Father of mercies, has reconciled the world to himself through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, not counting our trespasses against us, but sending his Holy Spirit to shed abroad his love among us. By the ministry of reconciliation entrusted by Christ to his Church, receive his pardon and peace to stand before him in his strength alone, this day and evermore. Amen.’

‘Amen,’ the dragon echoed.

Breath was beginning to rattle in his throat. I flipped through my book to the appropriate page. I reached into the briefcase, and opened the small container of oil, and smeared some just below his horns. Then I read out, “‘Into your hands, O merciful Saviour, we commend your servant Dominic. Acknowledge, we pray, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Enfold him in the arms of your mercy, in the blessed rest of everlasting peace and in the glorious company of the saints in light. Amen.’”

‘Amen.’

‘Now, Lord, you let your servant go in peace—’

The dragon’s voice cut across mine. With a sudden last burst of strength he sent ringing tones into the air. ‘*Nunc dimittis servum tuum, Domine, secundum verbum tuum in pace...*’

I felt tears come to my eyes. The plainchant rose and fell around me, reminding me of Evensong in my college chapel. Except I’d not known anyone with such a beautiful tenor voice. I put the book down and lowered a wooden cross on the soft skin just above his nostrils. He sang the last few words in a low whisper. Then he sighed, the large eye closed, and his spirit left his body.

‘Remember, O Lord, this your servant, our brother Dominic,’ I said quietly, drawing words together from half-remembered phrases. ‘According to your promises, grant him, and all who rest in Christ, the light and joy of your eternal refreshment. May the souls of the faithful departed rest in peace, and rise in glory.’

I lifted my hands from the dead dragon. A scrape of boots against asphalt made me look up, and into the eyes of a police officer, his high visibility jacket glowing even in the dimming light. I suddenly wondered what the man thought, finding a thirty-six year old woman knelt at the side of the road. ‘Can I help you, miss?’ Then he spotted the white plastic of my dog collar, and the name tag still clinging to my shirt. ‘I mean, Reverend White.’

His shoes were only inches from the splayed claws of the dragon's forefoot. 'I'm fine,' I said, rising to my feet. He still towered over me, but I'm used to looking up at people. I missed that day at school when they handed out height. 'Just praying.'

The policeman grinned. 'No need, Reverend. The driver and passengers are fine. No one's died tonight, thank God. Are you the vicar here?'

'No, just visiting some friends who live down the road. Don't see them as often as I'd like.' I spoke so convincingly that I nearly believed the lie myself. Never mind that I'd stayed behind after the training conference had finished, having one too many glasses of red wine at the bar rather than go home to an empty house.

I placed the book and stole into the briefcase and snapped it shut. 'What caused the accident?'

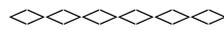
'No idea. The driver says he doesn't know what he hit, only it was large and spun his car off the road. He's stone cold sober, so who knows.'

The policeman's comments reminded me that I shouldn't let him get close enough to smell the wine on my own breath. I slowly backed away. 'Well, if there's nothing I can do, I'll get going.'

'Drive carefully,' he told me cheerfully. Then he walked back down the hard shoulder, still oblivious to the large body just a foot away.

Home, I told myself firmly. Black coffee, lots of water, ibuprofen, early to bed. As I turned to my car, I thought I saw someone shift behind a tree. My heart thudded again. Then a bat flew up into the night air, and I released my breath. Jumpy, too jumpy. Definitely time to go home.

The next day, when I finally pulled myself out of bed, there was no mention of a dragon on any news website. The traffic accident achieved only one mention, buried deep in a list of overnight police reports. A bad bottle of wine, I decided muzzily. That's it, I'm sticking to the better stuff from now on.



I made one last nervous sweep of the countertops, then stepped back to study the kitchen. Beer cans and wine bottles taken out to recycling, check. Dirty dishes hidden in sink, check. Cafetiere rinsed and ready, check. *Doctor Who Magazine* replaced by a Bible at the end of the dining table, check. I rummaged in a drawer, found a near-white strip of plastic, and threaded it into my shirt. Priest ready to meet her bishop, check.

Five minutes to go. Bishop Nigel was always on time, never a minute early nor a minute late. I put the kettle on, and studied the Dalek cookie jar lurking near the cooker. Should I put out some biscuits? Chocolate? Single malt whisky? The last would have been for me, obviously.

'Get a grip,' I muttered to myself. I'd heard from various people that my bishop thought I was a good priest. Why should I be worried that he wanted to see me? The vicarage was in good shape, the back garden was still visible despite the overgrown grass, and my congregation was holding steady even if not really growing.

The doorbell rang. I found myself singing a quick snatch of 'Onward Christian Soldiers' under my breath. I straightened, swallowed, and then strode from kitchen to front door.

Bishop Nigel gave me a smile. In my twelve years as a priest I've learned to tell real smiles from false ones, and this one looked real. Maybe he wasn't here because neighbours had noticed how many bottles clinked in my weekly recycling. 'Penny, good to see you,' he said. 'How are you?'

‘You know what I always say.’ I allowed him to enter, and shut the door behind him. ‘I’m all right, it’s the rest of them.’

His chuckle sounded genuine as well. ‘I often feel the same way myself. Where shall we go?’

‘The kitchen.’ I led the way. As he made himself comfortable in a chair, I poured boiling water into the cafetiere. The smell of coffee spread through the large room.

‘How do you like it?’

‘White, no sugar. I’m on a diet.’

Just as well I hadn’t put out any biscuits. I filled two mugs, and joined him at the table. ‘You don’t need to worry about your weight.’

The Bishop grimaced. ‘You’re very kind. My wife would say otherwise.’

‘Hmm.’ To me he looked fine, just a bit of a paunch under his purple shirt. A grey jacket hung from his shoulders, a shade lighter than his hair. I found that his brown eyes were studying me as he blew across his coffee. I said, awkwardly, ‘It’s always nice to see you, Bishop Nigel.’

He smiled again. ‘Even if you can’t work out why. I’ll let you know. I’m here because you asked me a question three months ago, and I didn’t give you an answer. Now I can.’

‘A question?’ I tried to remember. ‘Something intelligent and searching about the Trinity?’

‘No. About holy water.’ He put the mug down and leaned back in his chair. ‘You asked me about holy water and vampires. Whether water blessed by a woman priest would be harmful to a vampire who doesn’t accept the ordination of women.’

I felt my face flush. ‘Oh, that.’

‘We were in a public place, so all I said was, “Only you would ask something like that.”’

‘I watched a lot of *Buffy* when it was on.’

‘But now I can give you the real answer.’ The Bishop leaned forward. ‘Holy water doesn’t harm vampires. Which is just as well, as it would make it impossible to baptise them.’

I blinked. This coming from the man who preferred *Star Trek* to *Doctor Who*, who read serious science fiction and debated in the House of Lords about the ethics of genetic manipulation. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘No, I have to beg yours.’ He sighed. ‘Being Bishop of Nenehampton doesn’t release me from any of the Canons of the Church, particularly the Hidden Canons.’

‘Whisky,’ I found myself muttering longingly.

The Bishop straightened. ‘Yes, please.’

I started babbling. ‘But it’s only early afternoon, and didn’t you drive?’

‘I took the train,’ he replied firmly. ‘I usually I find that the conversation we’re about to have goes better with alcohol.’

Spirits resided in a cabinet in the kitchen. I reached for my favourite, Talisker, and brought it to the table with two glasses and a small pitcher of water. I poured a small portion into each glass. Bishop Nigel took the bottle, and doubled the amounts. He took a good swallow, then nodded appreciatively. I took a smaller sip myself.

‘We aren’t the only intelligent beings in this universe,’ the Bishop said quietly. ‘And I’m not talking about dolphins or whales. There is another world, in touching distance of ours, and their citizens sometimes cross over and walk among us. Most humans can’t see them.’

Some whisky went down the wrong way, and I coughed. The pain made my voice sharp. ‘But you said that fantasy novels were a waste of time!’

‘I prefer real science, real plots, not fantastical worlds with knights riding dragons.’ The Bishop took another swallow of whisky, and refilled his glass. ‘How much do you know about me, Penny? Really?’

I stared down at my glass. ‘I remember you were the vicar who wouldn’t let couples have “I Vow to Thee my Country” at their wedding.’

‘And more than that. I know you do your research. I’ve read your Master’s thesis. All fifty-five thousand words of it.’

That made me wince. Fifty-five thousand words on the theology of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I nearly apologised, but caught myself just in time. ‘You’re a conservative evangelical. You accept the Big Bang and evolutionary theory but maintain a belief in the Virgin Birth and the bodily resurrection.’ Then I looked up at him. ‘You were originally against the ordination of women, but you voted in favour of women bishops.’

‘My counterpart required it.’

‘Your counterpart?’

Another slosh of whisky into his glass. I tried not to look at how steadily the bottle was being depleted. ‘The equivalent of England in their world is called Lloegyr. Each diocese in the Church of England is linked to a diocese in Eglwys Loegyr, the national church of Lloegyr. So Nenehampton is linked to Esgobaeth Llanbedr. We have roughly the same parish boundaries. My counterpart is Bishop Aeron. At our first meeting, five years ago, she told me the Eglwys Loegyr had long ago accepted the ordination of females to all three clerical orders, and if we were to work together I would have to do the same.’

‘She?’ I repeated. ‘So this Eglwys Loegyr has had women bishops longer than the Church of England?’

‘Oh, she’s not a woman.’ The Bishop sighed. ‘She’s a dragon.’

Now it was my turn to take a deep swallow of whisky. ‘And her assistant bishop is a unicorn?’

‘No, he’s another dragon. But one of her archdeacons is a unicorn. The other archdeacon is a vampire. With a soul.’ He gave me a weak smile. ‘That’s why I found reading your thesis so helpful. I needed a crash course in vampires. Not that all of *Buffy* was accurate. But it helped me to understand why Archdeacon Rhis always asked for evening meetings.’

‘An archdeacon vampire with a soul,’ I said weakly. ‘That’s going to be hard to believe.’

‘I can understand that.’

‘Because lots of people doubt that archdeacons have souls.’

The Bishop laughed. ‘You once told me a joke about a blind rabbit and archdeacons.’

I winced. ‘Sorry.’

‘It was irreverent. That’s one of the things I was told to look for.’ He pushed the bottle and his empty glass away, and picked up the mug of cold coffee. ‘And for someone who has seen at least one of Lloegyr’s more unusual citizens.’

‘The dragon?’ I asked, suddenly shocked into remembering the events of just a few days ago. ‘Did I really see a dragon on the A43?’

‘You did. And I’ve been told you did a good job.’ He took a deep breath. ‘I’m here to talk about a diocesan role. If you’re interested, there is an application form to complete and you’d be interviewed by senior staff from both dioceses.’

‘What sort of role?’

‘Lloegyr, well all of Daear, their word for Earth, seems to exist in a parallel world, or plane, or dimension.’ I suddenly realised how unwelcome all of this knowledge had been to the Bishop, and in that moment I stopped expecting someone to jump out with a hidden camera. He was absolutely serious, the entire conversation was truthfully meant. ‘My first degree was in chemistry, not physics, so I can’t pretend to understand. But some of their people, and ours, can travel between the two worlds. Some do so with full consent from our respective governments. Others do so illegally, or accidentally. So we need people on both sides who can deal with the fallout from unwelcome visitors. Each English diocese has a Vicar General of Incursions. We need a new one, and I’d like you to apply.’

‘Who was the previous one?’

‘Canon Michael Tedbury.’

‘The one who died of a heart attack,’ I said, rustling up the appropriate tone of sympathy.

‘Not a heart attack.’ The Bishop sighed. ‘He made the mistake of looking at a basilisk. The role isn’t without its dangers.’

‘So. Let me recap.’ The room was spinning gently, and I didn’t think it was only due to the whisky. ‘There is a parallel world of dragons and unicorns and bears, oh my, and they’re Christians--’

‘Some of them are. Lloegyr is as multi-cultural as England. They also have Muslims, Buddhists, atheists, and a thriving community of Zoroastrians living in their equivalent of Manchester.’

‘But the Christians,’ I continued, struck by a sudden thought, ‘do they have, well, Jesus as human? Or as a dragon on a cross?’ Then I felt myself flush. ‘Sorry, being heretical is something I usually do deliberately.’

‘They portray Jesus as human,’ the Bishop responded evenly. ‘Centuries ago the Celtic Church sent missionaries, human missionaries, to Lloegyr. At my first meeting with her, Bishop Aeron quoted 2 Corinthians 5: 19. “To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself.” She pointed out that the Greek word is “cosmos”, the universe, which surely includes other dimensions as well as our own.’

‘They have the King James Bible?’

‘And the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, which they prefer.’ The Bishop grinned. ‘Sometimes, when I receive yet another missive from The Prayer Book Society, I want to recommend that they all emigrate to Lloegyr. They might be happier there.’

I bit my lower lip. I actually quite enjoy the 8:00 am Communion I offer once a month, even if only six people would turn up for a BCP service. ‘Why me?’

‘You meet many of the requirements. I’ll have my secretary send you the role description and application form, and you’ll see that for yourself.’ The Bishop stood, and I also rose to my feet. ‘Oh, do you remember any of your Welsh?’

I dug deep into my lessons at college. ‘*Gallaf siarad ychydig o Gymraeg*. Why?’

‘Welsh is the national language of Cymru and Lloegyr.’ He grinned. ‘In their world, the Welsh conquered the English.’ Then he was serious again. ‘Do you think you might be interested?’

‘Yes,’ I said slowly. Once the Bishop was gone, I was going to pour myself a large helping of whisky.

‘It’s just that I can arrange for the first part of your interview to take place this Sunday. You’d have to preach on whether the Bible teaches us that unicorns are real. The text would be Job 39, but the King James Version, obviously.’

‘Obviously.’

A taxi was already waiting in the drive. The Bishop gave me one last wave, then climbed unsteadily into the passenger seat. I went back to the kitchen, splashed Talisker into my glass, and pulled over the Bible. Time to read Job 39.



‘This is the Gospel of the Lord,’ I told my congregation.

‘Praise to you, O Christ,’ they responded.

I turned from the lectern, bowed to the altar, and lifted up the hem of my cassock alb as I climbed up into the pulpit. Then I stepped onto the small box the PCC secretary had made to give me some extra height. I patted down my green chasuble and glanced out across the small church. Twenty five faces looked up at me. All of them were people I knew well, the congregation of St Wulfram’s, people I’d looked after for the last five years. Disappointment rested heavily in my stomach. So much for the first part of the interview. I looked down at my sermon, shrugged internally, and began.

‘I’m not going to preach about *Doctor Who* today, although we did have that wonderful line in our first hymn, “sovereign Lord of time and space”.’ The congregation chuckled, and I relaxed. These were the people God had called me to serve. That’s what really mattered. ‘You might have wondered why Sally had to bravely read out so much of Job, a book from the Old Testament, although I’m certain a lot of you appreciated hearing the good old King James Version today. Well, I’m going to talk about unicorns. The Bible, in the original Hebrew, seems to mention unicorns. What does that mean for our understanding of the Bible? What did unicorns symbolise back then, in church tradition more recently, and what might it mean for us today?’

I ran through the references, raised issues of translation, and the concerns of biblical literalists. ‘Those who believe that the Bible has to be factually accurate, the Word of God without any error, don’t like finding unicorns scampering through the pages of the Bible. Since unicorns are mythical creatures, does this undermine confidence in the Bible? You all know that I don’t see the Bible that way. I accept evolutionary theory, for example, not a literal six day creation. But what if even literalists didn’t have to worry? What if unicorns weren’t mythical after all?’

I scanned their faces. A number looked interested. One woman had shut her eyes, and was possibly taking a nap. Others, I suspected, were wondering about their Sunday roast and whether they could get any gardening done that afternoon. I bit down on the temptation to throw in a sudden joke, and instead kept to my script, explaining how the mediaeval church had seen the unicorn as a symbol for Christ. The word ‘virgins’ brought a momentary flurry of attention, and I tried and failed not to smile.

‘What about today?’ I asked, reaching my conclusion. ‘We live in a society in which some people argue that believing in God is a silly fantasy. As silly and immature, perhaps, as believing in dragons, or unicorns, or the Fair Folk. But sometimes we can relate better to God as something other than a father, or even as a man. For those who’ve had abusive or absent fathers, God can seem threatening or remote. For those who have been hurt by men, Jesus as a man can be difficult to relate to. So I see nothing wrong with us imagining Jesus as, say, Aslan, the Lion from C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* novels. Or even as a unicorn. The horn of the unicorn carries the gift of healing, and Christ longs to heal each one of us with his love. Let that gift of healing touch you where you need it most. Amen.’

The Creed followed, the prayers, the Peace, and I moved to the altar during the next hymn to celebrate Communion. The words I've spoken, Sunday by Sunday for over twelve years, carried me past my concerns about dragons and sermons, and the continued lack of children at the service. Once again I felt privileged to be placing the wafers into the hands of those who knelt at the altar rail. For over eight hundred years people from the village of Beckeridge had come to this church, and I felt lifted by the centuries of faithful worship.

The last hymn was sung. I blessed and dismissed the congregation, and went to the vestry to change. The small oak box which held Alan's ashes stared at me from the window, and I changed in a hurry. I had become tired of having my husband's ashes in the house, so now he could only accuse me of neglect every Sunday rather than every day.

I exited to the smell of coffee wafting from the back corner. Real coffee, not instant. A previous vicar had insisted on it. He had hoped it would bring in new worshippers from the housing estates which now linked Beckeridge with Northampton. No such luck. The congregation still only consisted of villagers.

I collected my mug and wandered from conversation to conversation. Information about a member currently in hospital. A request to talk to a daughter about baptising a new addition to the family. A grump about the flower rota. The churchwarden providing a quick update about the repairs to the churchyard wall. I nodded, tapped notes into my iPhone, and made various promises.

One of the older members of the congregation was seated in a comfortable chair in the children's area. The woman gave me a smile, and I drifted over. 'And how are you, Margaret?'

'Oh, mustn't grumble, mustn't grumble,' Margaret replied. Her wrinkled hands gripped her walking stick as she rose to her feet. 'Just wanted to say, good sermon, Vicar.'

I smiled at the phrase. 'Glad you liked it.'

'Yes. I'll tell Bishop Nigel that I did.' And Margaret gave me a wink.

I froze. Margaret? Who had lived in Beckeridge all her life? Who had been baptised, confirmed, and married in St Wulfram's, and would one day have her funeral here? Margaret?

'Good sermon,' the woman said again. And I noticed, for the first time, that the silver top of her stick was in the shape of a slumbering dragon. 'About time we had a woman as Vicar General. I'll be praying for you.'

I watched Margaret shuffle out of the church. And a shiver went down my back as I wondered whether coming to serve as vicar in Beckeridge had been a coincidence. For just how long had the diocese been keeping an eye on me?