

Chapter 1



Sir Daemon stormed into his opulent throne room, his cape swirling behind him as testament to his state of mind. “Why am I hearing of this now?” he demanded of the poor page behind him.

“Accurate word has not been forthcoming, my liege,” Neesro protested, fearing the separation of his head from his body.

Sir Daemon plopped rather ungracefully onto his throne. “Since when has accuracy been a determining factor in your reports?” His mind blurred at the possibilities. “Dalriada besieged,” he mused. “Has she made retaliation?”

“No, Sir Daemon. She has not left the castle walls.”

“She does not sit idle.” His confusion grew. “Has there been word, rumor or otherwise, as to who was responsible?”

“No names yet.” Neesro hesitated a moment before adding, “There was one strange occurrence that bears mentioning, although I do not see how it could be true.”

“Amuse me,” Sir Daemon said flatly, showing he was anything but amused by this news at all.

“Rumor states there was a dragon fight in the skies over Dalriada at the time of the assault. Black and green.”

“Green,” he repeated in stunned disbelief, mumbling, “What has she done?”

Neesro was puzzled, but determined not to interject a stupid question into the moment.

Sir Daemon recovered from his shock enough to know Neesro needed further explanation. “Prince Walwyn was a green dragon, but being of the royal line, he had other markings as well. If she could have raised him, she would have done it before now.” He

sat up straight, impressed as much as surprised. "She has gone to the kingdom of the dragons and found an ally."

"You are not concerned of the black dragon?"

"Of those, I know." Sir Daemon tapped his fingers absently on the arm of his throne. "When the first arbiter was gathering power, he stole a dragon's egg. He planned to raise an army of guardians to solidify his power. Most were destroyed, but a few remain. Someone has found a way to put one to use."

"Who would have the power to control such a beast?"

"Control is relative; the natural intellect would surface," Sir Daemon mused, "Unless they have been bred. Dare I ask which dragon won the day?"

"The black dragon was defeated, but the green spared its life. Dalriada's archers are to take credit for their part in controlling the battle in the sky."

"Indeed."

A part of Sir Daemon could not help but be impressed. Dalriada had not faced a trial by siege for almost as many years as the Council resided there. He had wondered how it would hold; and he was glad that he had not followed the occasional temptation to try.

"Neesro, send for Alastor. Perhaps I have some preparations of my own to make." His posture straightened; his regal demeanor reminding all who saw him why he was in charge. "Then send for Iblis and Malphas."

"King Iblis has not been seen in the last two days, my lord, but it is known that Malphas returned home."

"Wretched wasteland," Sir Daemon uttered. "Give an extra reward to whoever carries that message."

"Yes, sir," Neesro said, his tone agreeing that such an assignment merited compensation. He turned to carry out his duties, but stopped short at Sir Daemon's additional comment.

"Not a word of this assault is to spread, Neesro," he warned. "Those who already know are already doomed by their treachery."

Neesro swallowed hard without turning around. "Yes, sir."

Miranda walked toward the courtyard with Sedgwick; Excalibur was already hanging at her hip to mark the danger they were heading off to face. No sooner had they crossed the threshold than Jeremy came into view. She thought it a trick of the dawn sky. He wore a suit of leather armor, obviously not fitted for him, and had his sword at his side.

“What are you doing here, Jeremy?” she asked suspiciously, though she couldn’t resist asking, “And where did you find that outfit?”

“I’m going with you,” he replied defiantly, adding with his customary grin, “And it was in the armory.”

“No, Jeremy. Not this time.”

“You need someone to watch your back, both of you. I can help. My sword to serve the Queen of Argyll.”

“Jeremy,” she reprimanded tersely. “You are needed here.”

“No, you are needed here. I am going to make sure you come back as fast as possible.”

It was useless to argue with Jeremy once he had his mind made up. She could order him to stay, but that wasn’t good for either of them. “Sedgwick, do you mind another passenger?”

Sedgwick grinned in his amusement. “Just be careful. I’m not likely to notice if you fall off.”

Jeremy looked as though he wasn’t sure how seriously to take the warning. Regardless of any physical danger, he had to admit the sight of Sedgwick as he changed back to his dragon form was most impressive and unusual. Sedgwick the man was a slight, though tall, young man with blonde curly hair. Sedgwick the dragon was massive and muscular and even more impressive by day’s light.

Miranda seemed less impressed. In fact, she seemed melancholy. Not exactly the mood he would have his queen in before battle; never the mood he wanted for his friend.

A set of reins, for lack of a better term, appeared low around Sedgwick’s neck and Miranda climbed right up Sedgwick’s arm, taking a seat on the broad flat area of his shoulders, hanging her feet over the side. Jeremy followed with less accomplished grace, and sat down beside her. She wrapped her wrist through a loop in the straps and Jeremy followed her example.

“You know, if one of us falls off, this thing will break our wrists.”

“Then don’t fall off.”

The assembled group in Sir Daemon’s large temple room was a sight to frighten even the sturdiest at heart. Representatives of every sloven, gore-mongering species that walked or crawled under the earth cackled at its requested attendance. Every snarling beast gnashed its sharp teeth and flexed its terrible claws in anticipation of the purpose of the summons. A call such as this from Sir Daemon could only mean a call to open war.

Tynan entered onto the dais and all voices in the rowdy group fell utterly quiet. Sir Daemon followed a moment later and all heads bowed to their lord and master. He surveyed the crowd with his usual authoritative stare, but he was keen to see guilt or fear in anyone, emotions not commonly found in this group. No clue would be too small with the stakes this high.

“To see you all assembled does me well. I defy any to stand before the combined ferocity of this group and not weep in terror.”

Since he seemed to be giving a pep talk, the demons, spirits and other beings began to respond, anticipating the news he would deliver would be everything they hoped.

“But I must confess to you, you are not here for the reasons I think are causing smiles on those faces and hunger in your eyes. There is a betrayer among you; one who has taken a side against me, and forced me to take a side against them.”

The collective air seemed to deflate from the group; and as with any group built only on mutual greed and goals, suspicion began to surface almost immediately. Glances gave away nothing as each began to evaluate their neighbor in a new light.

“Tessera has been singing her siren’s song and some of you have answered.” He paced on the dais, scanning the room again for signs of guilt or any sign of Tessera’s spells, physical or magical. “There are those among you, if not in this gathering, then in your own camps, who have taken up the cause of the banshee. Whatever she has promised, whatever power she sells,

as granted by her sorceress spawn, will be null and my retribution for treachery will be as nothing you have seen before.”

This time, he saw genuine fear in all of them. Sir Daemon was fairly even tempered, as far as demons go, which did him well in Council and kept many of his troops in line. His wrath, when unleashed, was something most of them had seen at some time or another, and a sight none wished to ever see again.

Sir Daemon noted Malphas’ appearance at the side of the room. Ever observant, Malphas studied the gathered group, looking from one to another in his search for the truth.

“I ask my faithful,” Sir Daemon continued, the stirring tone of the televangelist or revival preacher ringing through to the rafters, “To be watchful. The Banrigh was your friend, your leader. Your sympathy to her plight would be understandable,” he let his tone go cold, “But your loyalty is mine. And I will return it to you, only in exchange for your blood. Do not forget who leads you to greatness, who offers sweet souls for your pleasure, and feasts for your tables.”

The resounding roar was as deafening as it was ebullient. Tessera was a thorn in many sides and most would take great pleasure in removing her. Still, Sir Daemon could not help but watch for any sign of worry or hesitation among his followers. The banshee had help from someone and he would find out whom if he had to tear his kingdom apart. In grand fashion, he retreated back to his office and let the crowd disperse to carry out their new orders.

The barren ground radiated the sun like a blast furnace. Jeremy would give anything to have left the stupid leather armor back where he found it. He’d heard Sedgwick say they were getting close, but it must be by dragon instinct that he knew, because Jeremy had not seen enough scenery change to tell if they were close to the salt pan, or if they’d spent the last few hours going in circles.

Their direction, as far as he could tell, had been near perfect south-southwest since they left the island. Once they were out from under Kadar’s umbrella, Miranda got her magick back in full

force, but it was still no small task to move two people and one creature, with magick of its own, by teleportation. It had been a cosmic game of skipping rocks, passing in and out of parallel portals, over land and sea, to arrive at last on this desolate corner of the African continent.

He glanced over at Miranda. Her face was nearly expressionless, blank, as she rode with great comfort and ease on the back of a dragon. She was not unfamiliar with the sensation, he was certain, but it would have been years since she'd experienced it, and a little excitement would not be out of place. Instead, the only sign that she was paying any attention at all was the gentle and constant motion of her left hand as it stirred the clouds under them, masking their progression across the continent. It seemed wasted effort since he hadn't seen anything besides antelope and lizards since they crossed the Mediterranean.

Jeremy tried to shift his position, looking over Sedgwick's shoulder at the hard dirt skimming under them at an alarming rate. He didn't feel as though he were going as fast as his eyes told him he was, that momentary contradiction giving him a sudden severe case of motion sickness. He tried to comfort himself with memories of the lush green of Scotland and the cool breezes off the loch every morning, but he still felt hot and as baked as the sand.

"We're close," Miranda warned. "Slow down a little."

Their airspeed began to slow as they approached another unremarkable patch of hard salt and sand. Miranda scanned the horizon, knowing the scrub baobab trees would come into view quickly, marking the point of their turn to the world that lay beneath.

"You're the language expert," Jeremy prompted. "What does Makgadi ... whatever mean"

"Makgadikgadi," she corrected. "Means vast lifeless land. It only applies for a little longer. The rains will be here in less than a month and you won't even believe it's the same place."

Jeremy nodded his head, not in agreement but in certainty that the heat had just fried her brain.

"Sedgwick, left," she pointed.

The dragon banked smoother than the old single engine fighter Jeremy used to fly and settled into a much lower altitude. A stand

of scraggly trees stood in front of them, growing closer by the second.

“Hold on tight, Jeremy,” Miranda said, tightening her grip on the thin rope and pressing down against Sedgwick’s back. “And when I say it, hold your breath.”

Jeremy matched her posture and before he’d had the chance to process anything else, Miranda yelled, “Now!”

It was no problem for Jeremy to take a deep breath. He could do nothing else as they plowed straight into the sand.

A moment later, he shook the sand from his hair and opened his eyes, and found himself longing for the visible miles of desolate sand. They were in a long cave, flying the course of the magma river below them. The heat forced Jeremy to stay close to Miranda, centered on Sedgwick’s back. A loud burping sound made Jeremy jump. Miranda sat up a little, waved her hand and deflected the fireball of burning gases into the rock wall. He could see now why Miranda could not make this trip on her own.

They continued flying, deflecting and sweating for an interminable amount of time. A dark hole loomed at the end of the eerie red-lit cave, and they passed through it at full speed. Sedgwick changed to human form as they crossed the threshold and they landed abruptly on the floor.

The change in temperature was chilling. Jeremy eased up onto his elbows. Sedgwick was lying on his back breathing heavily; his clothes were wet and sticking to his body. Miranda was getting to her feet, and not too quickly. A few moments of the relatively normal temperature of the cave had them all feeling better.

“Let’s go,” Miranda said, walking toward the deeper black of the cave like she knew where she was going. Sedgwick and Jeremy followed, bumping into each other as the red light faded away.

“Galen,” Lachlan asked, hurrying to catch up, “Where is Miranda?”

“On a fool’s errand, which seems to be the only kind left around here,” he smarted off, catching himself before he asked, “Do you need her?”

“Nothing urgent. I thought I found something in the library to help.”

“Well, run it by Helena. She can decide if she needs to pass it along.” Galen sighed. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, Lachlan, but everyone thinks they’ve found something right now, and our desperate attempts to help are simply pulling Miranda in too many directions. None of us know Kadar like she does, and we have to filter our advice.”

“Of course, it’s just hard sitting on my hands.”

“Well, by all means, don’t stop looking. Just do what the rest of us have to do and stop talking to Miranda. Helena will have to do.”

“A good substitute,” Lachlan smiled. “I’ll go find her.”

“Check the kitchen. She’s been raiding the pantry for some spell of hers.”

“Thank you. I’ll see if Magda’s reached the boiling point on having her kitchen invaded yet.”

“Well past, I’m afraid,” Galen nodded and continued about his business.

Lachlan stood there a moment, and decided to return to the file room. It was as good a place as any to be right now.

Samuel pulled the pillow over his head. The kid next door was up again; teething was a horrible stage, and everyone on the floor knew it. He got up, grabbed his pillow and headed for the living room, closing the bedroom door behind him.

He dropped gracelessly on the couch and pulled the blanket off the back. He’d never kept a blanket on the couch before Miranda fell asleep on it once and he had to pull a blanket from the bed because he didn’t have an extra one. Now, he always had one ready, in case she ever came back.

Stray thoughts stirred in his mind as he faded back to sleep. Dawn was a couple hours away, so where was Miranda now? She had gone to Africa this morning, or actually their morning, and he hadn’t heard a word from her. In his heart, he knew Galen would call him with bad news, but success would not merit a peep. No wonder Miranda got depressed.

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Chinese food containers were scattered around the patio table as they sat on the balcony, enjoying the mild June evening. Friday nights were always interesting and tonight's fare was no exception.

"These egg rolls are great," Samuel proclaimed, taking a bite of his third. "Where did you say they came from?"

"Embarcadero and Davis."

"We don't have an Embarcadero in Denver."

"No, silly, it's in San Francisco." Miranda loved doing this to Samuel; his reaction was always entertaining.

Samuel didn't disappoint. "I'm eating take-out from Chinatown?"

"Close enough. Too bad I was running late, or you would have had take-out from China."

Samuel shook his head. Miranda was never ordinary. "On that note, back to basics. What about children?"

"What about them?"

"Do immortals have children?"

"It depends," she paused and sipped her tea. "Those species that are naturally long-lived or immortal propagate just like any other species. Those that are made immortal, vampires for instance, lose the ability to have children when they lose their humanity."

"What about you?"

"In theory, my species can have children. I got here somehow."

He'd learned to catch her odd phrasing, but he still wasn't good at knowing when to drop a topic. "In theory?"

"I personally can't have children. Poisoned broadsword through the gut. I was a young pup of forty-five then."

Stunned, Samuel could only say, "Sorry."

"Probably for the best. Children can complicate things, but can you imagine a kid in my life? Mommy pop-drops the little one off in the back of the school so she can stop by the office on the way to a demon hunt. I know why my mother left me at the abbey. Because she didn't want my life to be that.

Because she knew one day, she wouldn't come pick me up from school." As quickly as her mood shifted, it shifted back. "Sorry to get so maudlin on you."

"The real Miranda isn't as scary as you think she is."

"Ah, you only say that because I don't have my sword. I seem to remember a scream or two the last time you saw it."

"In my screaming defense," Samuel interjected, remembering full well that Miranda was not the only reason he was screaming, "I was pretty sure you were going to use it on me."

She smiled slyly into her glass. "I only thought about it once."

"Ouch," he laughed, consulting his ever-present notebook of questions. "Something tells me I should tread lightly on this next question."

"Oh, why start now?"

"You mentioned something before about the Inquisition. How did you survive?"

"You can't kill what you can't catch and they had their choice of simpler prey." She paused; long enough to worry Samuel that she'd decided to clam up. "It got out of control so quickly."

"I've seen you in action and I know you're old enough. You tell me it's your job to save lives. Why didn't you stop it?"

"Stopping the witch trials would have been like telling the North and South not to hate each other during the Civil War. It was possible to stop some, save some women, but to change the hearts and minds of millions of people is beyond the scope of magick. To change them by force, to impose your will over theirs is wrong, even if your cause is just. The judges, the people, all believed they were doing God's will. It doesn't matter how we see it now. At that time they thought they were right, doing what they thought they had to for God, king and country." A cold smile curled at the edges of her mouth. "There were those who condemned not for belief, but for self, either to revenge a personal wrong or to punish some pretty young thing for not returning attention. Those people were caught, they were punished by me

and mine, because they knew to their soul the reason for some woman's death, and they paid dearly."

"I would imagine. As I said, I've seen you in action."

"Well, what I couldn't stop, I tried to correct. A few coins to the magistrate would sell the property to me, and with a little work, it could be given back to the family." Miranda sighed, "Small compensation for losing a mother. And the majority of them weren't witches to begin with."

"You'd know, wouldn't you?"

"Indeed."