

BOOK 3 IN THE *FIVE IN CIRCLE*
S E R I E S

WE THE
THREE

C. H. MACLEAN

WE THE THREE – First 6 Chapters - PDF
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For you who have followed your heart: you've overcome so much, and yet have more to go.

Prophecy of the One

The one will drag us back in
the world with humans again.
One from each of we the Three
gifts he will need receive.
First, to a Guardian cleave
then all Others, binding Three.
Back and forth through worlds and time
'til now is ruin—sublime.
Empties their thrones and their pride
and all that we safely hide.
To our worlds he brings new rage
to return a golden age
infinite to all and Three.

-from *The Foretold*

PROLOGUE

Accelerant

Solbright seethed. Sheela, standing next to her, looked up at her for the third time. She took a step away slowly, obviously trying not to be noticed. Solbright noticed but wanted all of the energy, all the power her anger could bring. Sheela could cringe as long as she stayed on stage. And if her own well-trained daughter dared to show fear— Solbright puffed at how powerful she must look to the other dragons down on the floor.

Bigger than most human football stadiums, the cavern barely held the teeming mass of the rally attendees. Most of the sea of shimmering scales gleamed red-gold, but Solbright bared her fangs in appreciation of the numbers of silver and brown-black forms scattered amongst them. She swelled in pride at how with each rally, more and more of the non-Fire clans joined. Solbright hid her grin at her plans for something extra special for this meeting. Word of it would bring in even more. Not everyone here believed, but more would catch fire today, go out, and spread it.

Time to begin. She threw her wings wide, casting out energy with it, locking in everyone and locking out those not invited. She scanned for spies lurking in the mass below, a telltale twitch of nerves from being locked in. Her eyes flicked to a group of Water dragons, but what could have been a twitch blended too well with their constant shifting and swaying. While the unpopular edict against reproduction, broken with greater impunity over the decades, wasn't even considered right to follow by dragons with any sense, she didn't want to challenge it openly.

Yet.

She let the energy from her thoughts boil up in her as she pulled a ball from her spark and threw it out. A great fireball leaped away, exploding and shooting out spears of flames that exploded again. The light and heat flashed over the crowd, casting sparkles and reflections of silver and red-gold scales, even making the grubby Earth dragon scales shine for a moment. Was that a hiss from that small group of Water dragons? She made a mental note to follow up with them later.

"I am Fire!" Solbright roared, casting her thoughts out to everyone below. *"I am the air, flying, changing, and expanding. You may be Earth or Water, and have no idea what it means to be Fire. But whether you are Fire, Earth, or Water, you are all like me. Lords of this planet. There's no reason we should hide in caves or bow to any other. We have every right and responsibility to take back what should be ours."* She nodded down at the large stone table in front of her. The glittering cover on it disappeared, revealing piles of meat, chilled as those silver-scaled Water dragons preferred it, raw or roasted depending on the whim

of the Earth or Fire dragon. *"That, but for an accident, would be how your table is every night. Take a moment to sample, please."*

She watched out of the corner of her eye, pretending to talk to Sheela, as her several plants in the audience sampled the meat and oohed and ahed. Others joined quickly. The crowd devoured it in gulps, and after just a moment, they left the table licked clean. Despite the considerable effort, Solbright resolved to have even more next time.

"I see you enjoyed the food. There's a lot more where that came from."

The plants in the audience rumbled a chuckle. A few others shared looks, but not as widespread as she'd hoped.

"We put ourselves under population control, but humans need it most. We managed the planet for millions of years, keeping it healthy. And within a blink, their unchecked greed and thoughtlessness turned it into a garbage bin! Their powers are stolen from us, and they still have no idea how to use them responsibly. The humans are out of control, and even their own government agrees. Something must be done."

As if on cue, four black circles appeared above the crowd. Human figures poured out, dressed in shining silver suits and holding broadswords. They hovered for a moment, and then started firing bolts of energy into the crowd. Three swooped down to land around Solbright, swords ready. Sheela snapped at one and had a fang lopped off by a flashing sword strike. She blasted Fire energy instead, driving them back.

The other silver suits dropped into the crowd, hacking at dragons, spilling bright blue blood onto the floor. The small, silver figures looked almost insignificant next to the great beasts, but their size didn't stop them from wreaking havoc. Flames shot from a red-gold dragon, enveloping one figure. The silver suit stepped out, completely unscathed, to leap forward and slash at the dragon. A globe of water swallowed another silver suit for an instant before exploding into rain. A third silver suit slashed through boulders thrown at it as though they were made of air.

Dragons tried to flee, screaming in frustration. *"We're trapped, get us out!"*

"Why do you run?" Solbright roared back. *"We must join forces and crush them! Fear not. They're just weak humans."* She snarled in defiance and blasted the three silver-suited figures in front of her with fire. They stepped out of the flames, shoulder to shoulder.

"Death to the murderers and devourers of my people," the middle figure yelled, waving its sword and leading the charge.

Solbright pounced, stomping on two of the three onrushing figures. She could feel the shields that prevented them from being crushed. But the figures were out of the way, their swords trapped under heavy clawed feet. She followed with crushing mental attacks, preventing the figures from portaling out or launching their own magical attacks.

The third silver suit rushed forward and slashed with its sword, ripping through scale and leaving a burning gash on Solbright's neck. The figure leaped back, the splash of her bright blue blood on its sword an affront.

"Sheela, with me," Solbright thought, blasting the silver suit with a rope of purest Fire energy. A moment later, Sheela followed with a fireball of her own.

The silver figure threw up its hands to ward off the attacks. Solbright's assault bounced off the sword held up like a shield in front of the figure. Sheela's fiery blast from behind flowed around the silver suit.

But only for a moment. Solbright's attack penetrated first. The silver figure arched its back and screamed as the rope of Fire knocked the sword aside and speared the figure's chest. A moment later Sheela's second fireball blasted the figure to its knees. Under their combined attack, the figure disintegrated into ash.

Solbright lifted her feet to attack the two silver suits pinned, but they leaped down into the crowd.

"See them run," Solbright called. *"Join together, and defeat our foes."* The dragons attacked more fiercely. Working in teams, a trio of dragons cornered and destroyed two silver figures in quick succession. The remaining silver suits fell back, then disappeared into circles of black.

Sounds in the cavern fell, only a few whimpers and groans lingering as injured dragons struggled to their feet. Solbright gestured widely with her wings, casting a thought to select dragons in the crowd. Her aides rushed to help heal all injuries, and she nodded to the injured dragons as they looked up to her. She imagined the gash on her neck dripping blood, its blue almost glowing against her red-gold scales.

Sheela approached, perhaps to heal her, but Solbright waved her off and faced the crowd. *"You see what we are up against? You see what we can do when we work together?"* she bellowed. *"We have no choice but to take control. Now. They come to hurt us, to keep us down. We've given them too much, been too lenient, and see what's come of it. The time is long past for us to take back control, to be the responsible steward for our planet and do the right thing for all its inhabitants!"*

The crowd roared, the sound deafening, the tremendous echo reverberating throughout the cavern. She flared her wings, and the crowd silenced, eager for more.

"We bickered among our clans for too long. But those differences between us are insignificant compared to those that we must overcome outside of us. I look out and see not three clans, but one unified cause. A dragon cause. Together we can overcome. We need not be three alone. We the three need to act as one. Three as one, 'til it's done!"

The crowd shouted back, *"Three as one, till it's done!"*

Solbright reared back on her hind legs, spreading her front claws, stretching her neck, her wings splayed wide, a perfect picture of dragon beauty. The roar in response from all below filled her with an unstoppable power.

The crowd kept up its chant, *"Three as one, three as one!"*

Solbright dropped down onto her front legs again, dropping her head into a humble-appearing bow. She flicked her tail and caught Sheela's attention. *"Sheela, quickly, come here,"* she thought to Sheela alone.

"Incredible," Sheela thought back as she scrambled closer. "I knew you had something planned, but that was incredible! You have the crowd completely under your control! Setting up those humans to sacrifice themselves—"

"Shut up, Sheela. Just listen. Go backstage and intercept the five humans waiting in the wings."

"What?"

"The ones that attacked us weren't mine. You need to stop those I have coming in before they're found out."

Sheela's eyes opened wide.

"I have to stay and follow up with the crowd, but you better not let me down. Get them to come back in a bit, I'll meet with them to arrange for the next rally."

Sheela blinked and nodded quickly, slinking off.

Solbright swung her head back and rose up again on her hind legs, throwing her wings wide, covering Sheela's hasty exit. The crowd roared in approval.

Solbright glowed, her eyes slitting as she thought of the future. *Soon, you miserable humans, soon, we will be released. The One is come, and the dragon clans will rise again. You will be cast down, and I will be Queen!*

Chapter 1

Finding Faustas

“Aw, Dad,” Haylwen said. She didn't mean it to sound whiny and regretted the words once they were out.

“Haylwen, you've missed more than half of these meetings,” her father replied, “and this one is really important. Please get dressed and meet us in my antechamber as soon as you can.” He smiled, bowed slightly, and shut the door.

Haylwen climbed out of bed and trudged off to change, yawning. She hadn't gotten up in time to slip out before this meeting with one of Chuck's old cronies. Important, nasty old crony. Generally, she didn't mind her father's meetings and knew they were important. Her father could get voted off the throne by the Conclave. When she went, she enjoyed being new royalty and meeting the nobles of the magic users. Besides, dressing up in fancy clothes gave her an excuse to feel pretty.

As she opened the doors to her walk-in closet, she marveled at the transformation of her life. It seemed like just yesterday she was living out of boxes, never knowing where she was going to move next. Now she was a magic-using princess with a walk-in closet bigger than the living room of her last apartment. She strolled through the closet, running her eyes over a selection of dresses better than she'd ever seen in a store with her own eyes. And shoes to match! She pulled out a dress she hadn't worn yet, the bright blue of a protection bubble.

Then the guilt at how she had gotten this life leaped into her thoughts, as it did at every chance. Her thoughts tumbled and swirled, the dress blurring. Haylwen saw Vora's face, her gentle rabbit-rhino features twisted in anguish as Haylwen had pulled her back through the time-portal. Vora's young son, screaming silently and pounding on the bubble that had trapped him.

Haylwen tried to tell herself yet again that she'd had no choice, but didn't feel any better. The horror of watching Vora be beaten, trapped, and then kidnapped had filled last night's dreams again. She'd gotten one evil king off the throne but had brought the worst king in history back through time to do it. She couldn't escape the fact that her actions caused Vora to be kidnapped by Faustas the Traitor. Completely her fault.

She shook her head, and squatted down, looking at her selection of shoes. As soon as this meeting was over, she had to get back to finding out what had happened to Vora and her son. She pushed away the doubts that pressed in like pricklescrinch. If she'd brought that crazy betrayer Faustas to the present time, she could send him back. She had to.

She snatched up a pair of comfy shoes that mostly matched and threw her hair in a ponytail, not bothering with makeup or even washing her face. She had the feeling she was running out of time, and Vora'd be lost forever. If her father was too busy to look for Vora, why not let her help? She flew out of her pajamas, into her dress, and hustled out her bedroom door.

Haylwen trotted down the hall, not bothering to plan a route through the giant maze of halls and doors that was the Castle. Even going somewhere for the first time, she knew the way. The Castle spoke to her in a way. That one book on the Scepter of Kings had hinted that such a connection to the Castle was possible. But she didn't dare tell anyone, having learned that lesson from her talking to trees. Who knew what people would say if she told them a building talked to her. They'd thought she was crazy talking to trees, but trees were alive at least, right? Still, she thanked the Castle as she trotted along, telling it how beautiful it looked.

She turned the corner and ran into someone. Just a blur, and then she bounced back, landing flat on her butt, hands stinging. "I'm sorry," flew from her mouth. The next moment, every thought vanished. She gaped up at the man staring down at her.

Looking for an instant like a younger version of her father, the man sported a large mustache with curlicues on either side. Haylwen just stared, stupefied by who she saw. Faustas, here?

Faustas tilted his head at her, one eyebrow raised. Then his eyes narrowed, and he nodded once. "Found you."

Haylwen connected to the energy and threw a bubble up an instant before Faustas spat a bolt of energy at her. The bolt skittered off Haylwen's bubble and down the hall. He flicked his wrist with a grunt, and a bubble appeared around Haylwen's bubble, lifting her off the floor. She screamed.

"That won't help you," Faustas growled. "No one can hear you but me."

"What do you want?" Haylwen said.

"I know not if you are a demon or just an evil magic user," Faustas said. "But you stole my life for a selfish grab at power, and now you must pay."

Haylwen felt her bubble shrink and shred under Faustas's bubble. She fought back, figuring out what he did with the energy and countering it.

Faustas flashed his teeth in a shark's grin. "You are full of surprises. But so am I." He muttered and twisted his wrists, slamming her to the floor and shooting two bolts at her an instant later.

Haylwen teeth clacked together painfully. She kept ahold of her bubble, but it shrank a bit more and thinned.

His smile broadened. "I have you now."

Haylwen shut her eyes and searched for a connection to anyone who could help her. The only one she felt was her sense of the Castle. An idea popped in her head, and

she sent it to the Castle. A moment later, several sets of heavy footsteps clomped down the stairs, heading toward them.

Faustas turned to look over his shoulder, then back to glare at Haylwen. The pressure from his bubble increased, sharpening. Haylwen ignored the pain and fought with all her might. Her bubble slowly slipped, only the thinnest shell left.

The footsteps grew louder. Faustas took two steps backward, muttering something under his breath, and then turned and backed into the wall, his bubble disappearing with him.

Haylwen scrambled up just in time to see his black circle of a portal disappear. She shuddered, and then smiled at the four tiles that flopped around the corner toward her. *"Thank you,"* she sent to the Castle. The tiles lay still for a moment before sliding back the way they'd come.

Haylwen bolstered her bubble as she ran down the hall to her father. The idea that Faustas could portal into the Castle anytime he wanted scared her more than an attacking horde of pricklescrinch. Skidding to a stop in front of a door, she knocked, looking back down the hall. Despite not hearing a response, she opened the door, quickly closing it behind her.

"Dad, Dad," she started, dropping her bubble, but her father paused his typing only to raise a finger to his lips, silencing her. He sat behind his desk, phone pressed to his ear, and resumed typing furiously. She glanced at her brother, sitting in a chair across from him, rolling a silver ball between his hands. She and Cadarn exchanged bland nods.

"Yes, dear," her father said into the phone, "I know, but there's really nothing I can do about it. No, I'm happy to—" He listened for a moment. "Dear, Haylwen's here. I'm going to go so I can adhere to the carefully orchestrated schedule I'm so grateful you've arranged for me."

Haylwen imagined her mother's reply to her father's banter, and his smile confirmed it. He listened for a moment more, and then said, "Okay, dear, see you soon."

Her father set the phone down and leaped to stride out from behind the desk. "We might as well go and get this over with," he said. "We're actually early, but it might be nice to finish in time to get something to eat. Haylwen, you got here more quickly than I expected, did you run the whole way?" He gave her a pat on the shoulder as he flew past her and out the door. Cadarn jumped to his feet to race after him.

"Well, yes," Haylwen blurted, trying to keep up. "I ran because—"

"You knew this was an important meeting?" her father interrupted, smiling at her as he strode down the hall.

"No." Haylwen broke into a trot to keep up with him. "Well, I mean yes, it's important, but I ran into—"

"An ugly truck?" Cadarn grinned at her.

"No, butthead," she shot back.

"Now, children." Her father stopped and spun on them with a stern look. "Try to behave yourselves. You know how much is riding on this, not just for us but for all magic users."

Haylwen ducked her head as she and Cadarn said at the same time, "I'm sorry."

Her father nodded and in two strides grabbed the doorknob of the meeting room. As his hand landed on it, Haylwen jumped forward to stand right behind him. "But, Dad, wait." He looked back at her over his shoulder, already stepping into the room. "Faustas," she said, quietly but with force. "I ran into Faustas." Her father did a double-take and stumbled into the room.

The two men in the room stood up. The first man, gaunt with age, looked like a snake with his smooth facial features and lack of lips. The man next to him, silver sideburns and face like chiseled stone, wore a shiny metallic jumpsuit. Haylwen looked at them both and felt a chill trickle down her spine.

Her father nodded at the two men and ushered Cadarn and Haylwen into the room. He muttered quickly to Haylwen as she passed him, "We'll talk later."

The snake-faced man stepped forward, his hand outstretched toward her father. Haylwen flinched, tried to turn it into a curtsy but didn't pull it off. A twitch of the snake-faced man's eyes dismissed her. His smile, without a hint of happiness in it, landed on her father, and then slithered over to Cadarn.

"Thanks for inviting me." Snake-face's raspy voice held no hint of warmth. "I'm glad to see the rumors about you aren't true." The man in the silver suit cleared his throat softly. Snake-face, never taking his eyes off her father, flicked a hand behind him. "Go ahead, Abrennin here doesn't mind."

Without waiting for a response, the man in the silver suit murmured something, and with a twist of his hands, pulled a black circle open behind him. He backed out through the portal, bowing. Haylwen couldn't tell if the bow was to her father or to the snake-faced man.

"Cadarn, Haylwen, this is Dr. Bitten." Her father turned to gesture towards them, and Haylwen caught a flash of barely contained anger in his eyes. "Dr. Bitten, this is Haylwen and Cadarn." Before he turned back, her father's eyes regained their composure. "Dr. Bitten and I have known each other a long time."

"You've come a long way." Dr. Bitten smiled thinly.

Her father's mouth smiled back. Haylwen connected to the energy and stood closer to her father.

Dr. Bitten's eyes flicked back to Cadarn and lingered for a while. "I see your son turned out better than expected."

Haylwen's father stood a bit taller. "Not only is he a magic user, unlike the prediction, but he's more powerful than I am, which is saying something."

"So you were able to lift the Oath and cure your crippling?"

"I was never crippled," her father replied smoothly. "It was just a challenge to overcome. But yes, once crowned, I can use the Scepter of Kings to remove any residual issues."

"I never would've thought it possible," Dr. Bitten said, waving a hand. "Having seen it with my own eyes."

Cadarn looked between their father and Dr. Bitten. "Your own eyes?"

"Dr. Bitten was there when the king took my Oath."

"Forced your Oath, you mean," Cadarn muttered, clenching his fists and leaning forward. Haylwen felt the vast quantity of energy he gathered.

Dr. Bitten must've felt it, too, as his face blanched. "Yes, well, that was a long time ago, water under the bridge. A lot has happened since then; we've got bigger fish to fry now." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief to dab his brow. "It's all about votes now, correct? We need a strong king to hold control during these tough times. And the king is going to need good information and strong support. There are forces at work, of which you have only guessed."

"Yes," Haylwen's father said, smiling through a clenched jaw. "We definitely need to unite all of our strengths to guide us to a better future. We have many trials to face, and only in a unified force can we hope to have a positive outcome." While he spoke, he put his hand on Cadarn's shoulder. Cadarn relaxed his fists, but Haylwen felt him keep his connection to the energy.

Dr. Bitten nodded. "I'm glad to know we will be able to work together."

Haylwen tuned out the rest of their exchanges of pleasantries and vague promises of mutual benefit. She bit her tongue and spun her Ring of Fire on her finger, feeling it heat as her frustration grew. When her father shook Dr. Bitten's hand and escorted him to the door, she looked at Cadarn.

He rolled his eyes as the door closed and made a face. "I can't believe we need to kiss up to these old cronies," he said under his breath. Haylwen smirked and nodded.

"It's not kissing up, and we do need their support," their father said. "He's old but still a powerful figure in the Conclave of Controllers. He certainly knows more than he's letting on. As the saying goes, success comes from knowing your enemies and yourself."

"I'd say the man who worked to strip you of your magic is your enemy," Cadarn muttered.

"Another important saying goes, never attempt to win by force what can be won by deception," Haylwen's father rubbed his forehead. "There's so much going on, so many players with different agendas, so many lies; I can't say there's anything as simple as friends and enemies in politics. That's part of why you two are here: to learn."

"Cadarn should start with learning how to control his temper." Haylwen muttered.

"I don't know." Her father shrugged. "It can't hurt anything for Dr. Bitten to know how strong your brother is." He smiled at Cadarn, and Haylwen felt a pang. "Speaking

of learning," he continued, "since you are unschooling, I want you to read about those two sayings."

Haylwen groaned. Her father didn't really understand unschooling and regularly gave them homework.

Their father walked over to the bookshelf and pulled out two books, handing one to Haylwen. Haylwen read the title. "*The Prince?* Is there a princess somewhere?"

"Hey, I'll trade you; that one's for me." Cadarn leaned forward to look at the books as Haylwen and her father traded. "*Art of War?* Oh, I want to read that one next."

"Now, what did you say about Faustas?" Haylwen's father asked Haylwen as he handed Cadarn *The Prince*.

Haylwen's hand flew her mouth. "I saw him. He portaled right into the Castle."

"Are you sure it was him?"

Haylwen glared. "Of course I'm sure, he tried to grab me. Can't we come up with some sort of shield or something to stop portaling?"

Her father ran his fingers through his hair, lines creasing his forehead. "The Castle is supposed to be a public place. No-mus can't find it, and certain rules enforce themselves while mus are inside the Castle. But portaling is actually easy and encouraged. Open access to government and all that." He tilted his head and looked from Haylwen to Cadarn. "I'm sure Faustas is not after you in particular, sweetie, and I'm assembling a team to find out what is going on with him. But I'm bringing in more guards anyway, so I'll assign you a personal escort."

Haylwen's stomach clenched. She'd never be able to sneak off with a guard following her everywhere. "What about looking for Vora?"

"That's another mystery to unravel and may not be related to Faustas appearing."

"But Vora is important," Haylwen said. "We can't just leave her trapped. I can help. Can't I be part of the team that looks for her? Besides, if I find Vora, she'd help protect me from Faustas."

Her father patted her on the shoulder. "We can talk about that later, sweetie."

Haylwen scowled and looked at her book. *Art of War*. What she really needed was *Art of Getting Parents to Listen*. She glared at her father, Ring of Fire heating, but kept her mouth shut. Arguing with him wouldn't get her anywhere. But if her father had seen the look in Faustas's eyes, he would believe Faustas really was after her.

She tuned out Cadarn's questions about their next meeting. She'd have to do something fast. A personal escort not only would get in the way, but wouldn't stand a chance against one of the most powerful magic users in history. Unless maybe the escort was a Guardian. She shook her head at the irony that sneaking around for clues about Vora risked her being snatched by Faustas.

As much as she wanted to just stay locked in her room, safe and sound, she had to keep looking, and by herself. She knew guilt partly drove her. But a feeling from her

dreams told her finding Vora, and then helping the giant Guardian rescue her kidnapped son, were crucial to helping her father in a way she couldn't explain.

Chapter 2

Vora's Deal

Vora bashed at the energy bubble surrounding her. Fists the size of boulders sounded like an avalanche as they pounded against the blue bubble. Jaw muscles clenched, she dropped her snout to keep her two nose horns out of the way as she pummeled the walls. She tucked her rabbit ears back and slitted her eyes so her long eyelashes could keep the dust out as punch combinations flowed into kicks. Spinning roundhouses sent waves along the blue bubble, which looked like it might shatter at any moment under such force. She pounded one side, and then in a dizzying blur leaped to attack another side. She crashed against the ceiling, blasted the floor, and dust and bits of rock flew in a tornado. She attacked like lightning in a storm.

She fought on and on, bursting with fury, her arms and legs a blur. Images flashed through her mind, spurring her on. Her child screaming for help as he tried to escape an energy bubble. The curly-haired king named Haylwen showing her that awful scene, dragging her back in time to prove it real. Attacking the liars who'd faked her son's death to kidnap him—and failing.

Vora vented her rage with a bellowing charge, ramming her horns into the bubble, pounding with feet and fists. The cloud of dust swirled as she panted harder and harder until completely exhausted. Muscles aching, she pulled her feet and hands together, standing like a pole, still as a statue. Keeping her mind blank, she held herself in a meditative state until her breathing slowed and her heart almost stopped.

She didn't even look to see if her attack had affected her prison. She had been doing the same routine every day and had yet to even scratch it. She didn't think fighting would get her out. She only did this routine for exercise, every day, twice a day, since someone had pulled her out of that tile coffin and stuck her in this prison. As she meditated, the stone chips and dust settled down around her in a blanket softer than she was used to, and the air cleared.

She opened her eyes and held out her tired arms. After a moment, bales of long grass in various thicknesses fell into them. Bamboo mostly, but she knew somewhere in there would be a few sugarcane. Whoever her captors were, Vora grudgingly respected that, except for the first day when she'd had nothing, they fed her well. She wondered how special strains of bamboo developed just for Guardians, both nutritious and delicious, made their way into her meals. For what seemed the hundredth time, Vora wondered if king Joslachar had arranged her imprisonment here. The thought of his betrayal raged through her again.

Every mood tires, she told herself. But I will never give up, my son. I will find you no matter what it takes. With that promise like a prayer before her meal, she ate.

As she crunched through the last bite, she sensed something. She paused mid-chew, and her ears snapped up to their full height. Her nostrils flared. She smelled nothing and heard nothing. Just one of those odd senses she'd had since she was barely up to her mother's kilt. A kind of tingling that reminded her of the torture that curly-haired demon had put her through. But she reassured herself it was not magic. *Only dragons, kings, and the Hidden can use magic to be bidden.* The familiar singsong rhyme her mother had taught her to keep away the strangeness worked like usual. The tingling stopped.

An instant later, she leaped up when the blue bubble around her shimmered. She looked at her feet as the dust reformed into a solid block of rock. The blue bubble shifted into translucence. She looked out at an underground cave, similar to where she'd lived with that betrayer king Joslachar. Much smaller, it held fireballs just like the other, hovering in each corner.

A figure stepped forward out of the shadows. Vora strained every sense as she readied herself to defend or attack. Her jailer, at last! She looked down at him, tilting her head to one side.

He only reached her mid-chest, short even for human. King, she corrected herself. He's controlling the energy bubbles, so he must be a magic-using king. He stood only a pace away with calm confidence, another sign he must have much more power than met the eye. Most animals facing Guardians, dwarfed by their huge size, readied to defend themselves.

But this human, with an odd patch of hair on his upper lip, showed no fear. Vora looked into his eyes and saw determination that matched her own. As she sized him up, he did the same. He must watch her to deliver her food with such precision after the dust falls, but his scrutiny seemed fresh.

"My name is Faustas. I've done enough scouting to see that you're not really working for them," he said. "I don't know how it all fits together yet, but I think we can help each other."

"You want to help me?" Vora asked. "Do you know king Joslachar?"

"Indeed, I know king Joslachar quite well," Faustas replied dryly.

He apparently didn't see Vora's fists clench. "Then you know. Where's my son?"

"Your son? I'm sure I have no idea of what you speak," Faustas said. "I don't even know what kind of monster you are, or from whence you came."

Vora had heard enough. She didn't care if he was in league with the urine-haired king that had trapped her son, or the curly-haired king that said she'd help but didn't. Sick of magic users, she leaped at him, bursting out of the rock that held her, hands and feet out in a four-pronged attack. He didn't move, but a blue bubble instantly appeared around him. Vora only saw it as the slightest haze, but after recent encounters she knew what to look for.

She landed on top of it, balanced like a boulder on a bamboo rod. She didn't think she could break through this energy barrier any better than she had her prison, but she pummeled the shield just to be sure, alternating hands and feet, the rumble echoing through the cave like thunder. The bubble didn't budge or dent. She paused as she noticed the little king's mouth moving.

"Just let me know when you're finished," he said calmly.

Vora growled and flipped off the bubble. She landed on her hands and gave it a donkey kick. Her hands slid across the floor, but the bubble didn't move. She flipped back to her feet and stared at the bubble for a moment before stepping forward and grabbing it. Spreading her legs, she tried to rip the bubble from the ground, muscles bulging. She bellowed, pulling with all her might. But it didn't move.

Faustas raised an eyebrow. "Didn't you complete your workout for the day?"

Vora snarled and proceeded to pummel his bubble from every angle, looking for a weakness. She bashed into the rock around the bubble, looking for its bottom, but the walls drove straight down. She paused, glaring at him.

"Egads, you're bullheaded," Faustas muttered.

Vora resumed her pounding. Faustas mumbled something and waved his hand. Shimmering energy like red arrows appeared, hovering for a second before flying at Vora. She could have dodged but let them hit her. They struck her chest and head, burning. She fell sideways, landing in the rocky debris she'd created from her pounding. She twitched once and lay still.

"Blast and piffle, down so easily? Your defenses seemed quite tough," Faustas said. He took a step forward to stand over Vora and peer down at her. "I could have sworn you and the young woman—"

Vora grabbed Faustas in one giant paw. Her enormous fingers spanned his rib cage and waist easily. She leaped to her feet, raising him up in the air, tightening her grip, squeezing as hard as she could. She slammed him down, punching into the rocky floor. The explosion set chips of rocks flying up into Vora's face, battering her snout and forcing her to close her eyes completely.

When she opened them, rubble buried her hand to the forearm. The cavern echoed with rumbles, and then fell silent. Vora squeezed but felt the unyielding resistance of a bubble. A distant mumble came from beneath the rubble. She picked up her fist and shook Faustas off like a rag doll.

Unscathed, Faustas's face held grudging respect. "I know not what sort of monster—beg pardon, what sort of being you are, but you're not the dumb brute you appear to be."

Vora narrowed her eyes. "Thank you, I think. What do you know of my son?"

"As I was saying, I know *a* king Joslachar because one stole my throne from me. He is the ancestor of your king Joslachar, with what sounds like no improvement over time. I don't know all of what has happened from then to now, but I'm reading about it. If

you're fighting against the Joslachars, I'm on your side." He clenched his jaw. "I know not where your son is, but you should know my son was stolen from me, too."

Vora brought Faustas close to her face, peering intently into his eyes. Faustas, unflinching, looked back at her, as if sharing his soul. Vora nodded and set Faustas down. "I believe you. But so help me, if you're another lying king, I'll stop at nothing to crush you."

"I'm not the king yet, but I understand there is a vacancy for the position." Faustas's face twisted in a wry smile.

"Why don't you just go back, or get the curly-haired magic user to send you back?" Vora asked.

Faustas's face flashed past a grimace, and then flattened. "I will question that young woman, be sure of it, but portaling in time is impossibly dangerous." His eyes fell. "The books say my wife remarried a no-mu, had more children. My son grew and had children of his own. Everyone I knew has died, my whole family lost in history." His eyes leaped up, blazing. "All I have left is my duty to my people and the world. King of the magic users once, I will be so again. I must prevent the terrible catastrophe that Jossy started before it is too late."

He looked Vora in the eye. "The trees tell me the One is come, and my time is short. I think you and your son would be great assets in undoing wrongs and setting things right, and moreover, I glimpse freeing him fits with my other plans." He raised one hand. "I promise I will help you free your son, if we do it my way, and if you consider helping me after. What say you?"

Vora blinked. "You'll help free my son? After that, I would consider helping you. But I don't know I can trust you kings. Why should I trust you?"

"Don't trust me. Just like you, I'll do whatever it takes to reach my goals. But you can see that my goals are the same as yours. Watch my actions. For example, how well I fed you." He paused, raising a hand. "I apologize for missing that first day. I had to travel, couldn't be helped." His hand flipped, and he smiled. "Glad of it, though, as on my return I found your plants. Took quite some doing to sneak some out. So make your choice now. I would rather have you as friend, but either way, it matters not," Faustas said as he stretched his arms.

Vora's hand opened against her will, and she grunted. The bubble protecting Faustas grew around her hand, and she felt it tingle as it slipped up her arm and quickly covered her body.

Faustas sat up on her open palm and nimbly leaped off to stand on the ground. He took a step back and narrowed his eyes, clenching his teeth while raising one hand. "You may be powerful, but you are no magic user."

He opened his hand to clench his fingers into a claw. Tingling covered Vora's body, turning into pain as the bubble contracted. She fought against it, her muscles bulging, but she couldn't battle the constricting prison. In a second, her arms and snout pressed

flat, as if up against glass. Faustas turned his hand over, and Vora felt pressure on the top of her head, her neck straining. Within moments, even her massive legs crumpled, and she fell to the ground in a ball.

She couldn't move. Panic at being trapped surged through her. She flashed back to her prison of tile, suffocating, knowing she would die and never see her son again.

"If I were the type, I could kill you whenever I wanted. I've revenge enough to kill many," Faustas said, eyes blazing. He blinked and shook his head, as if clearing away flies. His face reddened as he looked into Vora's eyes. A quick flick of his wrist, and the bubble fell away. "I apologize. I've been through much."

Vora fell forward onto her hands and knees, gasping. With a shove of one hand, she sprung to the opposite side of the cavern. She stood there trembling until she could get ahold of herself.

"I do apologize," Faustas repeated, casting his voice across the cavern without yelling. "I have little trust, and you may seem normal to you, but I've never seen your like before. I still react to your appearance. Much has changed from whence I came."

Vora snorted and relaxed slightly, settling into a fighting stance. "I may misjudge you by your hideous appearance, too."

Faustas grinned. "Then let's get to know each other, shall we? Let us plan how we are going to save your son, my people, and set things right. Yes, let us discuss our mutual enemy, the Joslachars and all their kin."

From across the cavern, Vora's keen hearing caught the snarl under his breath, "And exact revenge for what they've done."

Chapter 3

Frenemy

Haylwen peered through the dim light across the great room full of people. She almost didn't recognize the place. This was where she'd fought Chuck, freed her family, and become a princess. The flashbacks seemed especially unreal compared to the apparent normalcy of the party streamers and crowd of people. She touched her Necklace of Vision, letting her unfocused gaze drift over the room. She saw nothing hidden, only her father's promised guards, and no sign of Faustas. She sighed and relaxed.

Haylwen waved at several people she knew, and they smiled and waved back. A few couples her age held hands. She scanned the crowd again, decidedly not thinking about Rivenwake and certainly not looking for him. While she edged forward, ready to go meet people, Cadarn drifted back. Haylwen knew if Nacia and the twins were here, they'd be out mingling already.

Haylwen and Cadarn weren't connected by thought, but he must have caught a bit of that. "Too bad the twins, Nacia, and Tommy couldn't make it to this party," he said.

Haylwen looked at him with a giant smile. "Especially Nacia?"

He shrugged and looked at his feet. "Or the twins, or Tommy."

She let him off the hook. "Look at all those kids. Think they're all magic users? When Mom first talked about unschooling, I worried about not meeting anyone."

His face twisted into a crooked smile. "I was looking forward to that part."

Haylwen took a step forward but didn't want to leave her brother behind. She tried again. "Come on, you know this is really important for Mom and Dad."

Along with all of the meetings, their mother had arranged a series of parties and dances as social interaction for Haylwen and Cadarn, and political opportunity for the adults. While unsaid, Haylwen and Cadarn knew they were supposed to win support among the young people for their father. Their parents assured them the vote was a sure thing, but they both saw the worry in their parents' eyes. She and Cadarn couldn't eavesdrop like before but still saw how late their parents stayed up, talking to people, working, and worrying.

Haylwen grabbed her brother's hand, pulling him forward, heading toward the food table. She knew he was antisocial, but he was being especially resistant tonight. She didn't know what his problem was, but was determined to help him even if he didn't want it.

Cadarn stopped resisting, and Haylwen dropped his hand. She smiled and nodded at people they passed as they picked their way through the crowd. The largest group of kids their age stood near the food table. Haylwen looked at the cheese, crackers, fruit,

sliced vegetables, and bowls of nuts, and saw her mother's influence. The only real snack food was some healthy-looking chips that were probably low-fat. Haylwen grabbed a few crackers and a water and looked into the group of kids from one edge.

Some looked out over the crowd or gently moved to the music. But all, to some degree, listened to a boy in the middle of the group telling a story. He looked a bit older than Cadarn, with a thick neck and beefy arms. He gestured at himself constantly while he talked. Haylwen kept losing the point of his story as he described all the explosions and how powerful a magic user he was.

Haylwen wanted to talk to some kids she knew but didn't want to interrupt the boy. She ate her snacks standing behind two kids she didn't know, who looked to be brother and sister, both with long, dark hair and dark skin and wearing brightly colored robes that appeared to be some kind of traditional garb of somewhere exotic. The clothes fell loosely, but Haylwen couldn't help noticing they both kept the same body type. She guiltily but happily saw that next to them, she'd look thin.

The girl glanced over her shoulder at Haylwen, who smiled. The girl smiled back, teeth so white against her dark skin they flashed. The girl elbowed her brother, leaned in, and murmured something to him. He looked over her shoulder at Haylwen and Cadarn and smiled as brilliantly, but without any of the genuineness of his sister. She murmured to her brother again. He just shrugged.

She stuck her tongue out at him and turned to Haylwen and Cadarn. "I am Taraweta, and this is my brother Mbuku. We're here for the coronation. This is our first time to your country."

"I'm Haylwen, and this is my brother Cadarn. Pleased to meet you," Haylwen said, trying to keep her voice low. Though a party with music, she still felt like they were interrupting the bragging boy.

"I've heard so much about you," Taraweta said, smiling. "It's very exciting to have so many powerful magic users in one place. My mother and older sister are over there." She pointed.

Haylwen followed her finger and saw two statuesque, dark-skinned women in similar clothes standing by another group of adults. Next to the black dresses and dark suits of the other partygoers, their bright clothes and flashing smiles looked like fireworks in the night sky. Haylwen turned back, nodding and smiling.

Taraweta leaned in. "I heard you Challenged the king," she said, her voice low but eyes intense. "Is that true?"

Haylwen tried to control her face as her heart leaped into her throat. She knew the right answer. She'd practiced it, actually. Her parents had explained while lying in general wasn't good, in this case it was better for everyone if they steered the discussion toward Cadarn and their father. But this girl's eyes, black as the night and just as fathomless, swallowed Haylwen up and caught her off guard. She knew what she was

supposed to say but couldn't find the words. Her mind scrambled to come up with an answer that wasn't a lie but somehow steered the conversation away. She failed.

"No," she blurted. "Cadarn did it all. I just supported, you know?" She cringed. That was just a flat-out lie. "I mean, Cadarn and my father did everything." She tried to recover, but it was too late. She saw a flash in Taraweta's eyes and a twitch of her mouth, gone in an instant. What was that? Before she could hold that thought, the bragging boy stopped. Everyone looked at Haylwen. Her face burned as she realized she'd not only lied, but done it loudly.

"Cadarn," the bragging boy said. He held up his hands and gathered all attention back to himself. "The great Cadarn I've heard so much about. Some people say you are the most powerful magic user in centuries, or might be. You think you're really something, huh?" He lowered his thick brows even more. "You don't look so tough."

"I never said I was tough," Cadarn said. He looked calm, one hand in his pocket, slouching a bit. But Haylwen could feel his discomfort.

The boy stepped toward them, jutting his chin out. "You think you're the hottest thing since miniskirts."

Cadarn blinked and raised one eyebrow.

The boy clenched his teeth and bulled on. "I'll bet you're not so hot." He took two quick steps toward Cadarn, who flinched and stepped back. "I thought so," the boy said, snidely. "Just a coward who got lucky."

"I'm no coward," Cadarn said, growling under his breath.

"Whatever, chicken."

Cadarn clenched his fists.

"Just let it go," Haylwen told him.

The boy waved at them both dismissively. "Coward and his worthless sister. And we're supposed to accept them as the next royalty."

Haylwen reached out to put her hand on Cadarn's arm. She connected to his thoughts, tried to reason with him. "*We're supposed to be making friends to support Dad getting the crown.*"

Cadarn glared at the bragging boy, and then at Haylwen. He took a deep breath, then blew it out slowly. "*For Dad,*" he thought back. "*You're right. Being crowned is the only way to get rid of their Oaths.*"

Cadarn had started to turn away when the boy said, "I knew you were a coward. Bet you're too chicken to duel."

Haylwen's chest clamped. "*A duel? He's got to be joking. That's dangerous and so not allowed!*" She looked at the boy's angry face. "*Cadarn, what's going on?*"

Cadarn didn't have any answers for her. They stood there blinking for a second and came to the same realization.

Instead of friends, they'd made an enemy.

Chapter 4

Lying for Truth

"I still have agents all through the Castle and beyond, you don't dare shut me out!"

Tommy cringed as his father jumped up, sending his chair clattering back. The twelve figures around the table moved, except for Mr. Skillian, so old he made Dr. Bitten look young and robust. But his sunken eyes flicked from Tommy to his father.

"Calm down, Chuck," Dr. Bitten said, giving him a smile with the warmth of a snake. "You lost. And unless you're the only candidate available, you'll never be king again."

One of three figures completely hidden under hooded robes leaned forward. A female voice slid out from the shadows of her hood. "I told your father I thought this human's child could be the One. Looks like I was right."

Dr. Bitten scowled even more fiercely and pursed his lips as if he were about to spit, glaring at the three hooded figures around the table. "I don't think we need your kind poking your nose in here. You are just advisors and have no real say in the matter."

The three robed figures shifted positions but said nothing.

Tommy, already hidden in the shadows, shrank a little more. He knew his part to play, knew he could pull it off, but still felt his guts churn and his neck tighten.

"But no matter to that," Dr. Bitten said, looking back to Tommy's father. "Your presence at a fully convened Conclave is questionable. Since you lost the Challenge, what right do you have to be here?" With a smirk, Dr. Bitten leaned forward, his eyes roving the table before landing back on Tommy's father.

His father's eye twitched as annoyance scurried across his face. He took a breath, and his face settled. "As you know, my duty is to my people," he said, lowering his eyes and raising his hand, forestalling any comment. "And the dragons, of course." He looked around the table. "And that is still the issue at hand. My being here is not. I showed you the prophecy, and you cannot deny the events. No matter who is the One, for us to remake the world so that it is the best for all, we need to choose the best king. We need the strongest magic user with the most experience and the most nimble mind, ready for the new challenges of a completely different world."

Tommy watched him look around the table, connecting with each of the Conclave. Every member received a smile, a small nod, something to pull them to agree with him.

"We cannot deny it," his father continued. "The dragons have too long been held back, relegated to the shadows. Their existence so well hidden, now thought only a fable, we have not done them good service. For wrongs long since atoned, we still keep them imprisoned."

Dr. Bitten scoffed. "They are too strong, too unmanageable, out of control. Even in their so-called prison they make inroads on us, attack us. They think we are lesser beings, not equals. I have—"

"Now, now," Tommy's father interrupted. "I've heard your stories, and you have no evidence. Besides, the way to deal with any possible problem is to bring it into the open, give them full voice, and let us work out how to live together." He looked around the table, giving Dr. Bitten a condescending look. "My colleague's ideas are outdated and obviously a good example of why I fully support new leadership."

"And who do you propose?" Mr. Skillian said.

"Abrennin Rightad." Tommy's father looked calmly around the table as murmurs of disbelief circled. "Bizarre to believe I would support him, I know. But he is the father to the One and is currently rising fast among the powerful. Politically, he is the correct choice."

"And you are sure this boy is the One of prophecy?" the female voice prompted.

"Absolutely." Tommy's father leaned forward to place his hands on the table. "Cadarn's obviously the One. He's a genius, a savant. Revolutionary power, magic like we haven't seen in a thousand years. But someone so young with so little training, set to change the world—it's unbelievable, I know. If you haven't seen Cadarn in action, you can't believe how strong and creative this newcomer is. Which is why I brought an eyewitness. Tommy, come forward and give your report to the Conclave."

Tommy shuffled forward, his head bowed. His father put his hand on Tommy's shoulder. Having practiced the move many times, Tommy didn't flinch.

"It's okay, son," his father said, smiling gently down on Tommy. "Just tell them what you saw."

Wonder what they'd say if I really did tell him what I saw. But Tommy stuck to the script. "About everything?" He looked up at his father, carefully arranging his face to look open and trusting.

"Absolutely. The whole truth. They know all about the pricklescrinch. Go on."

Tommy looked around at the faces, sweeping by the three hooded figures. He kept his eyes wide and eyebrows raised, just like he'd practiced in the mirror. "You won't believe it, like he said. But I was there. I saw it all." He took a breath. "I spied on them, kept an eye on the Rightads, especially the kids. I had an invitation to the Dragonway, so I could slip in and out. Usually nothing to report. But that day, as soon as I was beyond the barrier, I felt energy use like nothing I'd ever felt before. Like a Circle of thirteen headed for burnout, but with an oily stain over it. I followed it to the pricklescrinch. There were millions." He looked around, opening his eyes a little wider. "Literally. Millions of the little beasts, all over. The feeling was..." He shuddered. "Indescribable."

Looking directly at the figures in cloaks, he said, "Some of the pricklescrinch were as big as a horse." The three figures twitched at the same time.

He looked down, letting some calculated shame seep out. "Scared, I hid behind a tree. But I saw in the center of that mass of pricklescrinch, Cadarn sat in Circle. Just him, his sister, and three others I'd swear were no-mus." Tommy let the murmurs of outrage at no-mus in Circle die down before he continued.

"A silvery bubble around them, growing in power, more and more. Since the others were no-mus, it must have been Cadarn. All of that power from him. And then, as I watched, Cadarn threw out a Transcendent Clearing."

Outright grunts of disbelief burst around the table. Five in Circle producing a Transcendent Clearing? Impossible.

Tommy kept his face open, and nodded. "I said you wouldn't believe it. But he did. He cleared all the pricklescrinch, the millions of them, like they were nothing. I know that's impossible." He dropped his voice. "You can't do a Transcendent Clearing with less than thirteen. And to clear that much negative energy, you probably would need two Circles. But I was there. And the pricklescrinch are all gone."

"If he's so powerful, how did you drag him to the Castle?" Dr. Bitten snapped at Chuck.

"My agents were in position to use his mother. He wasn't tough enough to attack her, and she slipped a Spell of Sleeping on him," Chuck said.

Dr. Bitten slumped back, muttering, "Female magic. Bah."

The female-voiced hooded figure leaned forward. "And that's how you lost the throne? The boy defeated you?"

Tommy's father hung his head and nodded, then looked up, his eyes bright. "He's powerful, creative, unprecedented. We battled, pure energy lance to energy lance. He pushed me down. Without the Scepter of Kings, I... Well, I tried. "

"Let's say we believe you, Chuck," Dr. Bitten sneered. "Why not just support him outright as the king?"

"While the boy is powerful, and I have no doubt he's the One, he is also young and has no experience. As you noted, I should never have been able to snare him. He'll need the firm hand of someone behind him."

"But his father?" a rough-voiced man asked.

"With your agreement, of course. I encourage you to meet him, get your own assessment. Abrennin usually brings the One around with him, so you can Read him too. Come talk to me or another senior member afterward," he said, waving to Dr. Bitten. "I want to be sure we are making the best decision."

Tommy stepped through the portal with his father and back into their temporary housing. Though luxurious, it still wasn't the Castle. His father looked around and, not seeing Tommy's mother, immediately strode over to throw himself behind the

computer at the desk. Tommy glanced at his father, and then the door. Time to go, but he should be told to leave. He asked from under his eyebrows, "So, Dad, I did okay?"

His father looked up, his angular features sharpened by shadows cast from the computer's light. "What? Sure. Whatever. Go check on old skull-face, he might have something to say after that Conclave. I can't afford to lose his support right now." He dropped his eyes back to the computer.

Tommy nodded and slunk out of the room, waiting until he'd shut the door behind him before straightening into his normal posture. He checked the time. He'd pop over to the Castle before going to tuck Mr. Skillian in. The party would still be going, but he'd have to risk it. Something didn't make sense. Mr. Rightad needed to hear about this.

Chapter 5

If at First

The look on Cadarn's face told Haylwen he was going to duel the bragging boy, stupid idea or not. Haylwen felt for the boy's energy, tried to get a sense of how powerful he was compared to Cadarn. How risky was this duel? She remembered the book on how to properly Read a magic user's power but had practiced little. She tried Reading him and a few other nearby kids to compare.

He was pretty strong, but it was like measuring how tall he was over the phone. She felt for Cadarn's energy and just blinked before figuring out the problem. *Ah, must be his wish wand.* She couldn't compare energies, since Cadarn's drowned everything out. Like trying to see stars in the middle of the day.

"Aw, come on, he's new and doesn't have any formal schooling," one of the girls in the circle said. "It wouldn't be a fair fight."

"You're on." Cadarn smiled coldly. "Formal, informal, tournament, contest, or king's contest rules?"

Haylwen rolled her eyes. *"Of course you know all the dueling rules,"* she thought to Cadarn. *"Isn't dueling without permission breaking a bigger rule?"*

"Um, contest." The boy blinked rapidly, then snarled, "Doesn't matter. It'll be over fast. Let's go." He looked around, then snapped his fingers, muttering "Slighe" under his breath. Behind the pillar, out of sight from the adults, a black circle appeared. A portal leading to who knew where.

"Um, Cadarn, this doesn't feel good," Haylwen said. "Maybe we should tell Mom and Dad where we're going." She cringed as the boy spun his head. *Was that out loud?*

The boy stuck his face in Cadarn's. "What, you need permission from your mommy?"

Cadarn stared him down. "Nah, I'm good."

The kids around the circle whispered excitedly, lined up, and quickly stepped through the portal.

The boy nodded and smiled at them as they filed past. He gave Cadarn a look oozing contempt. "Step on through, or forever be a chicken."

Cadarn brushed by him, stepping through the portal. Haylwen took a last look at her oblivious parents and rushed after.

Once through the blackness of the portal, she slowed and looked around. Footsteps echoed, mixing with the murmurs of the other kids, creating a haunting sound in the huge open space. Dim light shone in through the windows of an apparently abandoned warehouse. Two parallel rows of steel pillars rose out of the cement floor, stabbing into

the darkness of the ceiling above. They ran the length of the long building, splitting the space into three wide hallways. The kids arranged themselves quickly, as if they had done it many times before, lining up along either side of the center hallway.

Cadarn stood at one end of the center hallway, tapping a foot, one eyebrow raised. The bragging boy slowly made his way down the hall between the two lines of kids, strutting slowly to the other end.

Haylwen hurried down to Cadarn. "I know you want to win, and it's for the best and everything, but don't hurt him."

Cadarn didn't take his eyes off the boy. "I know," he said, hand dropping quickly to a thin, leather pouch at his belt. "No worries, I'll just bring him down a few pegs. Not a scratch."

Haylwen thought bringing him down wasn't the same thing as making friends, but eyeing the crowd, maybe winning was the best thing politically. *Politically. When did I start to think like that?* She shook her head and hustled back toward one line of kids. She thought being a princess and having lots of friends would be great, but now it just seemed so much more work.

Taraweta smiled and waved for Haylwen to join her and her brother. *At least it's fun work*, Haylwen thought, smiling and striding over. Taraweta and her brother shifted, making room for her. Mbuku chewed his nails, eyebrows furrowed in concentration as his eyes leaped between the two ends of the hall, from the bragging boy to Cadarn and back.

Taraweta slapped Mbuku's hand. "Stop that," she hissed and glanced at Haylwen. "This is our first duel, and Mbuku is very excited."

Mbuku dropped his hand, but his eyes kept bouncing back and forth. "I know you have duels all the time, but for us they can end in death, so they are very rare."

Haylwen's eyes snapped to a movement from the bragging boy, who'd finally reached his end of the hall. He pulled off his navy blue sweater, showing a dazzling white shirt underneath. Sleeveless, with a deep neckline held together by a crisscrossed leather tie, it looked like something out of a stage magician's wardrobe. Haylwen had to admit, he had nice arms and looked like a powerful figure. He ran both hands through his hair, carefully restoring its spikes. He took a half-step forward, set his feet shoulder width apart, crossed his arms, then nodded once.

The nod spurred a girl standing on the edge to bounce into the center of the hall. Haylwen recognized her as the one on his arm earlier, must be his girlfriend. Flipping her long, blond ponytail back and forth, she looked towards both ends of the hall.

"Everybody ready?" she called out. She not only looked like a cheerleader but sounded like one, too. "On the count of three, the duel begins!" She counted backwards and with each number took a step back to the line. "Three, two, one, duel!"

Before the last word finished echoing through the warehouse, the bragging boy shot a bolt and three sizzling spheres at Cadarn. A sphere of blue, rippling like water,

followed by a glob of white, then one like a glowing red net. As the first sphere rushed by, an icy wind washed over Haylwen. She gasped as all of the shots landed on Cadarn. The bolt exploded, the ice water doused him, the white stuck in a mass, and the net covered it all. The space where Cadarn had stood now held a human-sized pile of red and white goo. The echoes from the explosion died away, and the warehouse fell into silence.

Haylwen held her breath for several pounding heartbeats. Her throat clenched tighter with each beat as she tried to feel for Cadarn's energy.

"Yes!" The boy pumped one fist. "Twenty-seven to zero! Undefeated and still champion. I knew he was nothing." The boy, breathing hard and sweating, threw his chest out and smiled broadly.

The crowd cheered at first, then fell back into silence as nothing came from Cadarn. The boy's blond girlfriend threw him a nervous look.

Taraweta touched Haylwen's arm. "Are you sure your brother is okay?"

Haylwen, eyes half-closed, focusing, finally found Cadarn's energy. She sighed deeply and smiled, shaking her head. "Yes, he's fine."

As if waiting for that permission, the mass lying on Cadarn quivered. The red net turned brown and rolled off, followed by a sphere of white and a sphere of blue. After peeling off, they circled above Cadarn's head.

Cadarn stood there, still with one hand in his pocket. He tilted his head to one side. "You want to try again? I'll give these back to you." With that, he flicked his fingers, like brushing a speck of dust off his shirt. The spheres rocketed back towards the bragging boy.

The boy gasped, then growled, throwing up his hands to form a blue shield. Haylwen wondered why he didn't recharge his energy. She hoped Cadarn could see the flimsy blue shield wouldn't withstand any one of the spheres rocketing toward the boy, much less all three. His look didn't seem to care, and Haylwen's hands flew to her mouth. The spheres screamed toward the bragging boy, and heads on the sidelines whipped to follow. The spheres screeched to a halt a foot away from him, in a queue.

Cadarn said, "Ah, now here's a problem. As Rehnquist describes in his treatise, a series should clear any shields in advance. With such an excellent series as yours, I'm surprised you didn't complete that step." With that, he drew a circle with one finger, muttering under his breath. A purple halo pulsed brightly above the boy as Cadarn's finger stopped, its glow reflecting off the steel pillars.

The halo settled on the boy's shield, then unrolled down it like a stocking. When the lower edge reached the bottom, it exploded into little blue and purple sparkles. The spheres, still in queue, started to wobble, pulse, and shift, as if impatient to get to work.

The shield gone, the boy looked wildly to his girlfriend. Her jaw snapped shut, her eyes closing, as Haylwen felt the girl connect to the boy and the energy.

Cadarn must have felt it, too, because he flicked a finger at the girl to block her, then wagged it at her. "No fair. Against contest rules to provide support to duelists."

The girl's eyes popped wide, and she stared at the boy. His face paled.

Haylwen started when Mbuku's voice jumped out next to her. "Pardon? I know contest rules allow such, but is it most fair to have only one side use a magical item?"

Cadarn paused to look at Mbuku and Haylwen. "*I don't know how he knows,*" she thought back to him, answering the unspoken question.

The bragging boy screeched, his finger quivering as he pointed at Cadarn. "You cheated! Do-over!"

"I did not cheat," Cadarn said. "You chose contest rules. All magical items are allowed in contest rules."

"Do-over," the boy screamed. "I don't care what the rules say; I want a do-over!"

Cadarn looked at him for a moment and shrugged. "Fine." He closed his fist, and the spheres imploded with a boom.

The boy walked on wobbly legs to stand next to his girlfriend. Whispers carrying rumors rattled up and down the spectator row.

Haylwen trotted to Cadarn, who was already striding toward her.

"Hold this for me," he said, slipping her his wish wand.

"Is that smart?"

Cadarn smiled down at her. "Duelling isn't just about who's the most powerful. This guy doesn't know a thing."

Haylwen put his wish wand in her back pocket and slid back next to Taraweta and Mbuku. She didn't look at them, wondering if she should stand somewhere else.

Taraweta caught her eye and smiled. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice soft. "He doesn't get to see many duels. I think he just wanted to find a way to make it last longer."

Haylwen gave her a weak smile. "It's okay," she said and looked back at Cadarn, biting her lip.

The blond girl recharged the boy, returning his energy levels depleted from the prior duel. Haylwen wondered why he didn't just connect to the source himself.

Cadarn stood in the same casual pose with the slightest blue shimmer around him. Why was he putting up such a weak shield? Maybe that was all he thought he needed?

The blond girl, looking drawn this time, shuffled to the center of the corridor again. "And duel, count of three." Sliding back, she said, "Three, two, one. Duel."

The boy stomped on two, thrusting one hand toward Cadarn. A purple bolt shot towards Cadarn and smacked into his shield, shattering it. Haylwen gasped, her hand flying to her mouth.

"Now let's see how well you do," the boy yelled and threw up his hands as before, shooting out a slightly smaller, yellow bolt and spheres of blue, white goo, and red netting as quickly as he could pump his hands.

Cadarn opened his arms wide, a black circle appearing directly in front of him as he yelled, "Slighe." The portal opened just as the yellow bolt reached him, swallowing the bolt and all three spheres.

As Cadarn's yell echoed, the bragging boy screamed. Everyone whipped their heads to look from Cadarn to the boy at the other end of the hall. A portal, obviously the other side to the one in front of Cadarn, spat out a yellow bolt, hitting the boy in the knees, followed by the three spheres, leaving the bragging boy soggy, gooey, and netted. Everyone stared at him for a moment, then a noise from Cadarn's side of the hall spun everyone's head back to him.

Cadarn shook his head. "You used Rubiyu again. You should've gone with a Monchart, or at least added an inverse shield." He walked slowly down the hallway to the boy. "Even the MacLean derivation of Rubiyu, from three to five different angles, might have worked."

He stopped a few paces away from the boy and reached his hand out, palm down. With a commanding, "Neo-dean," Cadarn dispelled the goo and the netting, leaving the boy sitting there clean and dry but shaking. "But you're powerful and have a great grasp of the elements. A quick learner, too. You're a great duelist." He narrowed his eyes, waved his hand, and muttered, "Slanaich."

The boy let out a big sigh. He looked up at Cadarn, eyebrows raised and crunched together in confusion.

"I'd love to train with you and would happily duel you again any time," Cadarn said. The boy's face fell from confusion into shock.

From behind them, a loud voice boomed through the hall. "No, you most certainly will not!"

Haylwen and Cadarn whirled with everyone else.

Haylwen's stomach fell into a pit before she even completed her reflexive turn. She knew that voice. "Dad," she mumbled. "Oh, crap." Haylwen ducked her head and took a step back into the shadows, cringing as her father strode by.

Chapter 6

Set Ups

A few of the more powerful kids disappeared through their own portals. Most just ducked into the shadows. Haylwen wondered if they didn't have the power to make a portal or just wanted to watch the show.

The barking clomp of hard-soled boots echoed through the warehouse. Her father strode briskly from the portal, followed by a man she didn't recognize, her father's catlike steps chased by the other man's loud boots. Both wore the same fierce expression, with eyes furrowed, lips set, and jaws clenched. They stopped a pace away from Cadarn and the bragging boy.

"Robby, were you dueling?" the tall man asked.

Haylwen's father glared from Cadarn to the bragging boy, Robby. "Oh, I don't think they were dueling. Dueling without permission from the king is punishable by death."

Robby whined, "But Dad, I thought you said there was no king."

His dad's face flushed bright red. "I didn't say that."

Haylwen's father looked at the two boys. "I've claimed the throne, and until ratification, I am king pro-tem. However, as Mr. Gunn here knows, that still makes me king, and gives me the authority to execute you on the spot for dueling."

"We weren't dueling," Cadarn said. "Right, uh, Robby? We were just training. Definitely not dueling. No, sir."

Robby nodded vigorously. "Right, not dueling."

Haylwen wanted to smack her brother, but she bit her lip, hoping her father would let this go. He looked like he might kill Cadarn and Robby, but she knew he wouldn't.

He leaned back, crossed his arms, and glared at the two boys.

Mr. Gunn looked from Haylwen's father to Robby. His face slipped from angry red to deathly pale. He looked back to Haylwen's father and narrowed his eyes. "I'll be glad to know when I vote for you that you appreciate the difference between boys training and actual dueling," he said carefully.

Haylwen's father returned his look coolly. "Oh, absolutely. Which is why I'm dedicating one of the large rooms in the Castle to daily training for any magic user. I'll be leading some of the classes, including duel training." He looked at the boys. "I assume I will see both of you there bright and early tomorrow, correct?"

Cadarn looked at his father, one eyebrow raised.

Haylwen's father blinked, his shoulders slumping. "Well, I will be rather busy until after the ratification, so maybe I'll have someone fill in for the short term." He fixed his eyes on Mr. Gunn. "You have experience in this area, correct?"

Mr. Gunn started, "I will also be terribly busy —"

Haylwen's father smiled coldly and cut him off. "It's crucial to have a strong support for our future, don't you agree? I'm sure you want to be an important player."

Haylwen could tell they weren't talking about teaching Cadarn and Robby anymore. Politics, always politics.

Mr. Gunn nodded once, his lips set. "I will find someone. But I think we've had enough training for one day." He grabbed Robby by the arm. "Let's go home and discuss the rest of your education."

Robby winced and followed after his father. With a wave and mutter, Mr. Gunn opened a portal and disappeared.

The show over, the kids around Haylwen fled. She bumped into several as they retreated, some begging in quiet urgency for a portal back to the party while she made her way toward her father and Cadarn. The sound of portals popping open and closed behind her echoed her footfalls. By the time she reached her father and brother, they were the only ones left in the now-silent warehouse.

She stopped behind her father. He didn't take his eyes off Cadarn. "So was that duel your idea?" he asked.

"We weren't dueling," Cadarn said again.

"He used Rubiyu's two times in a row."

Cadarn's jaw dropped. "How did you know?"

Their father just looked at him for a second. "I can't tell you that."

"Why not? Is it like some state secret?" He seemed to realize it at the same time Haylwen did. "Oh, your Oath against teaching," Cadarn said. "But I can guess. There's a magical item that lets you keep track of us." He didn't look very happy about it.

"I'll bet it's one of those crystal balls in the room with the golden door," Haylwen said.

Her father shot her a look. "How do you know about that?"

"I just read about it somewhere," she lied, kicking herself and her big mouth.

Haylwen's father looked at her through narrowed eyes for a moment, then turned his attention back to Cadarn. "But now, no jokes. Whose idea was it for the duel?"

Haylwen said, "It was the boy, Robby. He challenged Cadarn, and Cadarn didn't really have a choice."

"Well, it was a set-up," her father said brusquely. "I thought I told you how dangerous everything is right now. Until I'm ratified, people will take extreme measures to get what they want. Including deceiving naive kids into hurting themselves and each other." He fixed his eyes on Cadarn. "It wouldn't have matter if

you won or lost, although you were supposed to lose. Robby didn't know his white foam was laced with poison."

Cadarn's eyebrows leaped up. "So that's what that was!"

Haylwen's father nodded, and his face relaxed slightly. "Not just anyone could have out-dueled Robby or healed him after. I'm very glad you had your wish wand."

"I didn't need it to out-duel that guy," Cadarn said.

Haylwen's father fixed his eyes on Cadarn. "Dueling really is punishable by death. Don't forget it."

Cadarn swallowed and nodded. He turned to Haylwen. "Speaking of which, can I have my wish wand back, please?"

Haylwen reached into her back pocket. She gasped and reached into her other back pocket, her insides tumbling in an icy nausea. "I don't have it!" She raced back to look at the floor but knew it was already gone. Her father and Cadarn joined her a moment later. She looked at them, tears brimming as she searched her brother's furious face and her father's very worried one.

"It was a double setup," her father said. "Or we have more enemies than even I know about."

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About the Author

To young C. H. MacLean, books were everything: mind-food, friends, and fun. They gave the shy middle child's life color and energy. Amazingly, not everyone saw them that way. Seeing a laundry hamper full of books approach her, the librarian scolded C. H. for trying to check them all out. "You'll never read that many before they expire!" C. H. was surprised, having shown great restraint only by keeping a list of books to check out next time. Thoroughly abashed, C. H. waited three whole days after finishing that lot before going back for more.

With an internal world more vivid than the real one, C. H. was chastised for reading in the library instead of going to class. "Neurotic, needs medical help," the teacher diagnosed. C. H.'s father, a psychologist, just laughed when he heard. "She's just upset because those books are more challenging than her class." C. H. realized making up stories was just as fun as reading, and harder to get caught doing. So for a while, C. H. crafted stories and characters out of wisps and trinkets, with every toy growing an elaborate personality.

But toys were not mature, and stories weren't respectable for a family of doctors. So C. H. grew up and learned to read serious books and study hard, shelving foolish fantasies for serious work.

Years passed in a black and white blur. Then, unpredictably falling in love all the way to a magical marriage rattled C. H.'s orderly world. A crazy idea slipped in a resulting crack and wouldn't leave. "Write the book you want to read," it said. "Write? As in, a fantasy novel? But I'm not creative," C. H. protested. The idea, and C. H.'s spouse, rolled their eyes.

So one day, C. H. started writing. Just to try it, not that it would go anywhere. Big mistake. Decades of pent-up passion started pouring out, making a mess of an orderly life. It only got worse. Soon, stories popped up everywhere—in dreams, while exercising, or out of spite, in the middle of a work meeting. "But it's not important work," C. H. pleaded weakly. "They are not food, or friends, or..." But it was too late. C. H. had re-discovered that, like books, life should be fun too. Now, writing is a compulsion, and a calling.

C. H. lives in a Pacific Northwest forest with five pets, two kids, one spouse, and absolutely no dragons or elves, faeries, or demons... that are willing to be named, at least.

Overcome Reality. Invigorate Dreams.

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