

FOUR OTHER EYES
THE FIVE IN CIRCLE SERIES

C. H. MACLEAN

FOUR OTHER AYES – First 6 Chapters - PDF
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For those brave souls who go out, fight for their lives, and save the day, and for those who stay at home and do the same.

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

FAIRY WISH

Nicholas crept through the forest, his strongest shield and a bolt of energy ready. While not the most powerful magic user, he was above average skill, and wasn't shy about anyone knowing it. He didn't exactly know what he might need to catch a fairy.

Legend said if you caught one, she would grant you three wishes to let her go again. Nicholas wasn't sure if he'd let her go, or keep her prisoner and see how many wishes he could get out of her. Might be interesting to pull the wings off and see what happened.

He desperately needed those three wishes. How could he be penniless? He was a magic user. Those no-mus should be paying him for living on his land, not the other way 'round. He'd lost track of his debts, and his friends had vanished faster than a losing duelist through a portal. Gambling to win funds hadn't worked. He'd almost lost his hands by the swords of the people he'd tried to cheat. With how they were going on about the colonies' revolution, you'd think they'd have paid less attention to how many kings were in a deck. Fortunately, he'd been quick and clever enough to throw his drink in their faces and make a clean escape.

A branch snapped back, striking him in the forehead, sending his already pounding headache into spirals of agony. He stood still for a moment, muttering, waiting for the pain to subside. "A never-ending mug. Whatever ale or spirits you name will fill to the brim." Just thinking about a drink made his mouth water and his hands tremble slowly. He couldn't decide if a never-ending liquor cup would be his first or second wish. The other'd be a bottomless pot of gold. A perfect match for his bottomless mug. He was brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.

The face and voice of the beautiful blond woman floated up into his mind, unbidden. *I just heard of another fairy sighting. If you catch a fairy, they have to give you three wishes. You've heard that one, haven't you? Imagine what a man like you could do with three wishes.* The stroke of her fingers across his cheek had sent a rippling heat over him at the time. The echoes of that heat flowed over him again now, strengthening his resolve.

A breath-soft noise whispered through the trees. Nicholas froze. Hadn't he heard that dragons guarded fairies? But everyone knew dragons didn't exist. A tiny voice whispered that those same people said fairies didn't exist either. He stuffed the thought down and dreamed of his three wishes and the blond's caress.

He took a few more steps, and the bolt of energy in his hand vanished, the shield dwindling and dying. He stopped to recharge but was too weak to reach through the new, prickling barrier between him and the source of magic. He'd never gone without a

drink this long before. That must be it. Nicholas had always thought courage was synonymous with not thinking about something long enough. But the thought constantly with him after the blond's touch, the cup of ale and the pile of money three wishes would bring, gave him strength to move forward.

He didn't need magic to catch a little fairy. That was why he'd brought the bag, wasn't it? He'd poached many a deer from the king's wood without using a scrap of magic. Spine bolstered, he crept forward almost silently through the forest.

A glittering in the treetops caught his eye, and he froze. Gone now, it had vanished near the enormous flowers of a snaky vine. He scrambled up the tree, using the flowers like steps. A few blossoms ripped off as he climbed. Was that a moan? Must have been his imagination.

Another glitter. This time he tracked it, a tiny winged figure darting down to the ground and away. He slid down the vine, ripping off flowers, trading stealth for speed. Gold glimmered in his eyes, the taste of drink on his lips.

He crashed through the brush into a small glade. Three glittering, winged fairies hovered, side-by-side. Nicholas pulled out his bag, ready to snatch them up. Three fairies with three wishes each, that'd be a lot of wishes.

A movement to his right became a man wearing just a pair of smallish breeches, leaning casually against a tree. Nicholas dropped his hand to the dagger at his belt. Before he could pull it out, the man smiled largely and held up one hand. "No need for that. I shan't harm you."

Not drawing the dagger, but not moving his hand either, Nicholas peered at the oddly dressed man. "And as long as you don't interfere with me catching fairies, I have none with you neither." He kept an eye on the hovering fairies glowing brighter with each moment. Were they getting larger?

The man shook his head, muttering to himself. "What has happened, I wonder? A plague of trespassers of late." He fixed his eyes on Nicholas. "Don't suppose you'd listen if'n I told you fairies can't grant wishes? Their magic is no more than mine or yours."

This odd man, a magic user? Nicholas tried to focus and connect to the source of magic. But that damned wall stayed between them. So be it. At least if he couldn't use magic, this wild man couldn't either. Nicholas snarled and drew his dagger. The man was lying, of course. The blond had warned him someone might try to steal his wishes or convince him to give them up. Like she'd said, Nicholas was too smart for that.

"Step aside, sir, and I will not be forced to hurt you." Waving his dagger, Nicholas stepped forward, bag at the ready.

"As you wish." The man dropped his head in a mocking bow. "I've delayed you long enough." He slipped back into the shadows.

Nicholas would've sworn the man's features changed, his face darkening, ears growing pointed, fangs filling his parting grin. He blinked, but the man had

disappeared. The fairies glowed even brighter, and Nicholas dismissed the strange man, sheathing his dagger and opening the bag. A few more steps, and he'd swoop up his prizes.

The fairies weren't really trying to flee, but two drifted to either side as Nicholas crept closer, hunting his prey. He'd have to settle for one. He ignored the other two as he passed, focusing on his prize.

The fairy hovered, still growing larger, almost human-sized now. She looked like a beautiful woman dressed in the sheerest material. Nicholas stopped and leered. At least now he knew what his third wish would be.

He put on a commanding face and stepped forward, trading his bag for his dagger. "Just cooperate, and no one will get hurt."

The woman smiled back. Her teeth grew longer, curling over her lips, tusk-like. A dense fur grew over her face as her eyes widened, the pupils enlarging. Nicholas took a step back as she doubled in size and doubled again, towering over him. Her legs shrank and her arms grew long, huge claws sprouting out of her fingers.

Stumbling back, Nicholas turned to run, slamming into a tree. A soft, slightly moist tree. Bouncing off, he craned his neck up into the face of another monster. He screamed, and the warm breath of something spicy and fruity washed over him before a sharp pain sent him into blackness.

CHAPTER 1

UNDER ATTACK

Haylwen rubbed her hands together as she stood on top of the grassy hill. The pre-dawn's dim light made the rolling grounds, patches of forest, and castle-like mansion nestled in the middle look black and white, hiding the estate's beauty. The property looked like a scene out of a horror movie.

She closed her eyes and connected mentally to Cadarn. *"Nothing here so far. You?"*

Though in a different time zone, Cadarn's thought returned instantly. *"Nothing here either. Lemme check with Nacia."*

A silent pause, and Haylwen felt disconnected.

He popped back. *"Nothing from her position."* His thoughts felt mostly calm, but Haylwen picked up a hint that his theory could be wrong.

She shivered in the cold. *"And what if the dragons don't attack today?"* Haylwen regretted the words as soon as they left her mind.

"If my calculations are off, we'll have to rethink the whole strategy." Cadarn's worry jittered through their connection.

Haylwen tried to quickly recover. *"I'm sure you're right about the dragons' strategic intent."*

Cadarn had worked really hard on his presentation about predicting the dragons' next attack, but Haylwen hadn't understood how he knew the dragons would attack a specific place. The map and graph had only confused her more. She'd certainly understood the obvious skepticism of the older magic users. Cadarn had said he wanted to prove to their parents and the other nobles he could be a good king, but Haylwen heard his real thoughts. He wanted to save the world.

She wanted to help him, and he'd been so sure of his theory, but she had her doubts. *"I just meant, how long are we going to sit here?"*

Cadarn relaxed, his tone lightening. *"Every previous attack has been when the sun is up. My figures show a ninety-eight percent chance they'll attack one of our three positions today."* He didn't mention that his and Nacia's positions were an hour ahead. The sun there was already up. So if he was right, Haylwen would most likely be the one fighting off dragons.

With that thought, the sun's first rays poked over the hill, lighting the land in a golden glow. Even more beautiful than she remembered, the parts of the estate's grounds she could see showed flowerbeds around grassy expanses, with gardens scattered throughout. The owners had been told to pretend like nothing was out of the normal while Haylwen and the team hid in wait, and had driven away minutes ago.

Haylwen thought they'd wanted to ignore her and her group of silver suits and giant Guardians, in any case. Scared, used to being the ones with power instead of being powerless, most nobles still floated in denial. Dragons? Crazy. Crazy.

The sun edged a little higher, and Cadarn checked in. *"One of us should know pretty soon."* His voice softened. He must have felt a bit of Haylwen's anxiety. *"We'll send reinforcements to the site under attack."* A pause. *"General Roberts is here, I'm going now, but I'll check in soon."*

The sun crept up as Haylwen chewed her fingernails. Finally, the sun peeped over the trees, shining so brightly she had to squint.

Then she felt a chill. Connected to the source energy that surrounded her, Haylwen felt the energy shift, like walking from the blazing sun into shade. She looked around, hand over her eyes, and scanned the skies, her neck tensing. For a moment, she thought she saw a black spot in the sun. The spot disappeared, but then the sun started growing bigger by the second.

As she realized what was happening, shouts hit her ears. *"Attack incoming!"*

Haylwen threw a shield up in front of the giant fireball heading toward her. The ball broke apart into a spray of fire that crashed into her shield bubble and the shield around the house. The shields held, but everything outside them went up in flames.

Another fireball crashed down on her and the nearby trees, rumbling the ground beneath her and sending a tremor through her bubble. She dreaded to think what the Guardians and other, weaker magic users were suffering.

She finally saw the dragons as they flew in front of the sun. Enormous and fast, they grew from bird-sized silhouettes to sparkling monsters in a moment. She froze, heart thudding. Their red-gold scales and gleaming wings shone in the sunlight as they swooped in, blasting fire.

She caught glimpses through the fireballs raining on her—three dragons. One was diving to hover above the house, another swooping in on the Guardians and magic users hidden in the trees just to the side of the house, and the last soaring right above Haylwen. She focused all her attention on maintaining her shield. She struggled, desperate for a break in the barrage that would allow her to contact Cadarn and call in reinforcements to take care of these dragons. But the blasts rained down with fury and accuracy.

The dragons had flown to their positions so quickly, as if they'd known precisely where to attack. A plummeting feeling churned Haylwen's stomach, like she'd fallen out of a window. The dragons knew the mansion was being guarded, even knew exactly where she and the other magic users were hiding. Someone had tipped the dragons off.

The realization brought a flare of anger that heated Haylwen's Ring of Fire. With that extra energy, she opened a portal and jumped through to pop out on an unaffected

section of the grounds. She glanced back to see a dragon pounce down onto the charred earth she'd left.

She connected mentally to Cadarn. *"They're here. Send reinforcements."* She felt his shock and fear, and something else.

"What? Can't be." His crystalline-sharp mind intuited something, then he cursed. *"Lemme check something. Hold on."*

Haylwen felt him throw a barrage of metal spears and drillers. What was he doing?

Still holding their connection, he connected to Nacia at the other location. *"Nacia, what's your status?"*

Through Cadarn's connection, Haylwen felt a sliver of Nacia's mind. But only anger, fear, and the urge to attack came through, no truly coherent thoughts. Then the connection snapped and disappeared.

Cadarn radiated concern and a little bit of pride. *"She's fighting dragons too."*

"How...?" Haylwen's head spun.

"I can almost see what she's seeing when we're connected." Cadarn's voice fell away as his concentration flew somewhere else. Then the connection dropped.

Haylwen bit her lip and glanced back at the dragon. The enormous beast looked down, then turned to stare down the hill at her. Too late, she remembered dragons could follow a portal. A moment later the giant beast leaped at her, spewing flames.

Haylwen shot fireballs and a spray of spinning metal disks at the dragon. Wings flapping, the dragon swooped up to avoid them. Everything flew past except one of the disks, which sliced through a wing, cutting a neat ribbon through the flesh. But the dragon didn't pause, the wing already healing as she poured flame down on it again.

Haylwen threw a shield up, but despair started to creep in. She hurriedly opened another portal to pop back to where she'd started. She threw fireballs at the dragon to get her attention.

The dragon twisted mid-air, looking boneless as it turned toward Haylwen. Two powerful strokes of her wings sent the dragon rocketing toward Haylwen. With a surge of power, Haylwen opened an enormous portal in front of the dragon, too big to dodge. The dragon dove into the portal, banging its wing tips on either side when it couldn't tuck them in quickly enough.

That would only buy a moment. Haylwen wasn't in charge of the protection team, but that didn't matter now. She'd have to take over.

Haylwen sprinted down the hill to where the Guardians and other magic users were battling to hold their shield bubbles against the other two dragons. She connected to the magic users, aligning with their energy to duck inside their bubble. An instant later, a roar proved her dragon had returned.

Captain Tyler, the silver suit in charge of the troops, ran toward Haylwen, his silver helmet held loosely in one hand. He clutched his weapon tightly to his chest like a security blanket, and about as useful. Behind him, two silver suits knelt over a third,

who lay motionless on the ground, and worked to patch up his chest. The entire front of his suit was either black or gone.

She felt Cadarn's thoughts return to the back of her mind. Holding a hand up to stop Tyler, she turned her attention to her brother.

"You're under attack too, three dragons?" Even mentally, he sounded breathless.

Haylwen sent back images of what her team was facing. Dread twisted her guts. *"You've dragons attacking you too?"*

His mind tight, Cadarn's reply hit like a blow. *"All three sites were hit at the same time."*

Haylwen scrambled to figure out what that meant and what to do, reaching the same conclusion Cadarn did a split-second later than him.

"We have to retreat." Cadarn's connection disappeared even as she nodded.

Blinking, she saw Captain Tyler still standing where she'd left him, frozen. "Get your men and the Guardians ready to retreat," she told him. She'd never seen anyone look so relieved in her life.

She called out to the five magic users, huddled together in their Circle. "We're leaving. I've got the shield. Andrew, make a portal back to the castle." She took over the bubble, strengthening it while an older man turned to point towards an open space inside the shield, a black circle opening. Pointing at Tyler, Haylwen nodded. Silver suits dove into the portal, carrying wounded. "Magic users next, then Guardians."

Haylwen felt the battering on the shield intensify. "Hurry." The dragons must have figured out they were running. Despite shrinking the bubble as its inhabitants left, Haylwen could barely hold up under the dragon's attack. She jumped through the portal, shouting, "Close it now!"

A wave of heat rolled over her an instant before the portal snapped closed.

She staggered across the throne room until she could get her bearings. Guardians, silver suits, and magic users were crossing back and forth. A set of four silver suits escorted a small crowd. Two of the silver suits carried weapons, scanning the room. The other two gestured and urged the crowd along. Haylwen couldn't tell who among the crowd were Conclave members. Her father had tried to explain once why the Conclave were considered "nobility," but she didn't get it. People were people. Too bad it took a dragon attack to prove her point.

A portal opened, spilling out Guardians, silver suits, and a few people, including Cadarn, before snapping closed. Two silver suits were dragging a blackened lump behind them, and Cadarn tripped and fell on it. Scrabbling away, he barely made it two steps before turning to throw up. Haylwen ran toward him.

Cadarn waved his hand, using magic to clean up the mess before she reached him. He turned toward her, his face pale. "That silver suit tried to attack a dragon single-handed. His suit lasted two seconds." He shook his head. "The dragons teamed up. They knew exactly how to flame him."

Haylwen nodded. "They knew where we'd be." She dropped her voice. "Which one betrayed us?" Their father had suspected one of three Conclave members in his inner circle was a traitor. Part of today's plan was to flush the traitor out.

Cadarn looked around, then answered quietly. "To attack all three sites like they did, all three betrayed us. I only leaked one site to each member." His eyes kept moving, scanning the room.

Haylwen shivered. "So that's why the dragons attacked all three places."

"No," Cadarn said slowly. "They attacked the way they did because they knew how to. But they attacked all three because they're in even more of a hurry than I thought."

"Hurry to do what?" Haylwen muttered.

Cadarn's darting eyes landed on her. "Weren't you paying attention? Their attacks aren't random. My graph clearly showed the pattern."

Haylwen just looked at him.

"Why didn't you tell me you didn't understand the graph?" Cadarn shook his head. "The dragons first cleared out large concentrations of magic users. Now they're setting up a defensive perimeter around the Castle, removing staging areas for counterattack." At her blank look, he continued. "They're going to try to capture the Castle, and they don't want any resistance afterward."

Haylwen's throat clenched. Her home. No way she'd let the dragons take it.

Cadarn's eyes locked on a portal that had opened on the other side of the room. "For the life of me, I can't figure out why they want the Castle so badly, or why they're preparing so carefully before attacking it."

Silver suits rolled out of the portal. Cadarn and Haylwen both held their breath. Three Guardians ran out, each carrying a human, but none of them a dark-haired girl. The portal vanished. Haylwen's heart stopped. Where was Nacia?

Fear rolled off Cadarn, then another portal opened. A figure dove out an instant before the portal snapped closed. Dark hair swirling, Nacia did a shoulder roll, then popped to her feet. Cadarn ran toward Nacia, and they flew into a swirling hug.

Happiness for her brother flowed through Haylwen with the slightest tint of jealousy.

She walked away, deep in thought. She had a clue about the dragons' intent. The Castle had saved her more than once, moving bricks and tiles, and it sort of talked to her. It was alive, and like a friend to her. But what that meant to the dragons, she didn't know.

Haylwen considered telling Cadarn or her parents what she knew about the Castle but dismissed the idea. She couldn't prove it; they'd think she was as crazy as Faustas. Besides, she had a hunch being ratified king would make Cadarn able to hear the Castle too. She'd have to figure out a way to convince her parents and Cadarn to be ratified as soon as possible. Before the dragons attacked the Castle.

Because she had another hunch—that only the ratified king would have enough power to defeat the attack.

CHAPTER 2

CLASH

Rivenwake looked around, stunned. For the first time in tens of thousands of years, the giant cavern teemed with dragons. He tried to tell himself it was only the unfamiliarity that twisted his innards. It didn't work. His thoughts and energy roiled and twisted, flashes of a curly-haired human caroming through his mind as he moved in an almost ceaseless fidgeting. Fortunately, no one expected a Water dragon to hold his body still, and centuries of practice allowed him to keep his face and energy in a mask of calm.

He tried to focus, forcing his eyes to skitter over all the dragons, searching for a clue as to Solbright's plan for this gathering. Her open attacks on the humans had sent a wave of rumors through all dragons, and this gathering promised to be more active than usual. What would Daerren do to Solbright for breaking the treaty?

As the head of the Water dragon clan, Rivenwake had to come. But Solbright had personally invited him to stand in her area, and then come back to her cavern after the meeting. Her invitation slipped in with a veiled apology for her daughter having tried to kill him.

He'd asked Daerren what to do—Rivenwake's judgments, jumbled by his recent difficulty in seeing the Flows, needed confirmation. The old Earth dragon hadn't hesitated in answering. "Go, if you can. Your insider knowledge is invaluable. Even if Solbright thinks you might be a spy, she'd try to get you to let some key piece of information slip out. But beware. Solbright is incautious but not incapable."

So Rivenwake had agreed to meet with Solbright after the gathering today. Looking around now, he wanted to back out. Tension burned between the dragon clans even in the best of times. Here, the look in the eyes of the red-gold Fire dragons held nothing but fury or malice, and he couldn't avoid glancing at them. Usually the all-female Fire clan slightly outnumbered the all-male clans of Water and Earth; here, it looked like one hundred females to one male. The females constantly flapping their wings multiplied their size and aggressive appearance. Using their wings to unsettle the other clans—obvious but effective.

The cavern, segregated into three approximately equal sections, arched upward, although not enough to allow flight. Nevertheless, the Fire dragons took every opportunity to snap their wings open and fan them, cracking the air into swirling whirlwinds. The small tornadoes blowing past him rippled with heat, and Rivenwake had to constantly pull on the energy to protect himself. Adding to his tension, the constant barrage beat on him like the ocean's crashing waves meeting a waterfall.

Trying to make the motion seem part of his constant movement, Rivenwake looked around again. While tradition and self-preservation demanded the clans separate, each clan to one section of the cavern, today they mixed and mingled in wild abandon.

Solbright had argued she had too many dragons to fit in her section, which was true. When had her Fire clan grown so large? Rivenwake felt like a pricklescrinch was sitting on his neck, with so many Fire dragons behind him. He glanced around, noting the scattering of silver-scaled Water dragons, with even fewer Earth dragons among the teeming mass. Rivenwake narrowed his eyes. The Earth and Water dragons' spacing was too regular, too evenly spread to be random. And the Earth dragons, tucked just in front of the Water dragons, kept looking over their shoulders. He stifled his shock when he realized what she had done, keeping the male dragons off-guard. Solbright, for all her faults, planned well.

Before he could think anything else, a boom exploded in the cavern. A small space in front of the third section filled with a dragon the size of a double-decker bus. Rivenwake held his sigh of relief inside. Daerren, head of the three dragon clans, was finally here.

Daerren looked much like the other Earth dragons, with no wings and his brown and black scales rough and thick, overlapping somewhat randomly. He stood out, both as the largest dragon in the room, and for the power of the energy rolling off of him. He moved his broad head back and forth, scanning the wide cavern. Rivenwake's scales tensed. While he was probably the only dragon in the cavern who could tell, Daerren's deep-set black eyes didn't look pleased.

The murmurs floating through the cavern died down for a moment, then rose even higher. A Fire dragon separated herself from the rest and walked to the front of the third section. Even with Daerren waiting, Solbright took her time going through the crowd, flicking her tail and touching claws with dragons as she passed. Rivenwake looked at Daerren, seeing his claws digging into the stone floor as Solbright kept him waiting. Triple-checking his mental shields, Rivenwake caught Solbright's smirk as she played the game of power.

When Solbright reached the front of the section, the mental noise of the crowd rose higher, a whispered, *"Solbright"* echoing in the cavern. Solbright raised one wing, and the noise stopped, the cavern dropping into silence.

"Let's get started, shall we?" Solbright projected her thought so all dragons in the cavern could hear.

"Not your place, Solbright," Daerren thought, rumbling voice boulders rolling down a hill. *"I am still head of the clans and call meetings to order."*

"Maybe we should change that." Solbright smiled toothily.

An instant of absolute silence echoed in Rivenwake's head. Then noise exploded. Shouts and cheers echoed in his mind as roars and bursts of flame filled the air inside the cavern.

Daerren eyed the dragons until the noise settled. *"Perhaps we should take that up at a different meeting. Today's meeting is not about—"*

"Why not today?" Solbright cut him off with a snort of flame. She flicked her wings open, indicating the crowd of dragons behind her. *"We have representation from three clans, and certainly enough votes."*

Rivenwake bet all of them would vote for her. An icy dread trickled through his veins. In fact, they'd likely readied to vote for her. No wonder she'd brought so many along, from all clans, and spaced them so. He felt the momentous decision rise into the air like the instant before a tsunami crashes into land.

"Even the head of the clans cannot put aside laws that bind us all." Daerren's growl rolled through the cavern like an avalanche, backing up his words. *"The choice of who will be head and lead all the clans requires time."*

"Coward." Solbright rose to her hind legs, slashing the air with her front claws. *"You hide behind archaic rules out of fear. But I am fearless. I have the support of all three clans, and moreover, I am the One of prophecy!"*

Despite his millennia of training, Rivenwake's neck scales flared.

Even Daerren blinked several times. *"You're not the One."* His upper lip curled. *"A human is."* He looked as if he wanted to say more, but didn't.

"It's a prophecy from a dragon about dragons," Solbright snapped. *"Why should a human be the One?"* When Daerren didn't reply, her face split into a grin of triumph. *"Now is the time we will remake the world. We will reclaim this planet for ourselves, as it should be, and start the new golden age of the dragons."* The dragons around her roared again, and Solbright fell back onto her four legs. She glared at Daerren. *"If you aren't with us, you're against us. All enemies shall fall."*

Silence followed.

Rivenwake held his breath and watched Daerren closely. For a moment, and then two, Daerren stood as still as if he were made of stone.

"You know not what you do." Daerren's mental voice, low and calm, held the weight of a mountain. *"We have given you every chance, watched as you led your clan and even advised the humans to damage the planet, risking death for us all with your impatient foolhardiness. We had hoped you would wait a little longer for the prophecy to unfold. Soon the humans will elect a new king, and the actions of the true One of prophecy will show you how the Flows should be."*

Solbright took a short hop, landing almost nose-to-nose with Daerren. Rivenwake stifled a gasp as murmurs raced through the crowd. Daerren's low, reverberating growl shook the cavern, sending pebbles raining down on the dragons, sounding like water on a tin roof.

Solbright bared her fangs and flicked her tail. A shield of light blue formed over her head, followed by others in overlapping sections, spreading to cover the rest of the fire

dragons packed around her. *"You're mistaken, old fool. I'm not asking, I'm telling. You can step down and support me now, or you can be cast down and ground underfoot."*

Daerren didn't budge. *"I am Earth, and you are Fire, and there's only one way this battle will end."*

Solbright leaned back and shook her head, her neck scales glinting. *"You have no idea what I'm capable of."* She narrowed her blazing eyes, ridges of scale forming a V between her eyes.

Rivenwake took a half-step forward, starting a yell. But it was too late.

Solbright raised one front foot, and bolts of blue shot from her claws. Daerren, moving faster than seemed possible for a creature of his size, jumped to the side. Instead of stabbing into Daerren's chest, the bolts grazed one rear leg, melting scales and cutting into flesh. Bright blue blood poured out for a moment, covering Daerren's leg like a can of paint on the highway. He roared, boulders falling from the ceiling in an avalanche as he sent bolts of his own shooting back at Solbright.

But she leaped up to hover over the shots, escaping unscathed. *"Attack! A feast for the one who kills this traitor to dragons."*

Rivenwake watched in horror as several silver-scaled dragons reared up out of the crowd on their hind legs, front claws reaching forward. But before they could attack, Daerren roared, and a vibration trembled the cavern. Out of the floor erupted a handful of Earth dragons, flinging aside whatever unfortunate creature stood in the way. Stalactites and stalagmites throughout the cavern exploded outward, revealing Guardians.

The two groups of creatures shouted, charging toward Daerren. Being less than a quarter of the size of most dragons didn't slow a single Guardian as they charged through the crowd. Their rhinoceros heads lowered, muscles rippling, the Guardians leaped at dragons, slashing and stabbing. The Earth dragons followed, throwing their heads and powerful tails back and forth, biting and swatting at anything within reach.

Roars erupted as the dragons exploded into a jumble of limbs and flashing scales. Smaller Fire dragons flew to crash into other dragons as teams of Guardians and Earth dragons flung them like giant sandbags. Daerren must have given strict orders, as not a single Earth dragon fired bolts to kill.

Once the Guardians and Earth dragons formed up near Daerren, the flurry settled quickly. The Guardians formed a line in front of the handful of Earth dragons. For an instant, Rivenwake pictured the scene from a human viewpoint. The Guardians stood almost twice as tall as a human, looking like massive versions of their bodybuilders. The dragons loomed behind them like stone walls.

Rivenwake blinked, shaking his head and looking at his silver scales. As a dragon, he saw the Guardians, too few and not even armed. They were a pitiful match against what they faced. Across from them, a swarm of roaring dragons filled the cavern with armored scales, fangs, and claws. Small bursts of flame hinted at hidden dangers.

Solbright, front and center, flanked by an Earth dragon and several Water dragons, bared her teeth in a fierce smile. She raised one clawed finger, starting to swing it behind her. Rivenwake cringed, dreading Solbright's command to attack.

But she froze as an explosion of flames on Daerren's side resolved into a red-gold Fire dragon almost as large as Daerren. At the same time, a silver Water dragon rose from a stream trickling on the floor. Before he could even fully emerge, a thick wall of energy, shimmering red, blue, and gold, sprang up in front of the Guardians.

Solbright's eyes flared, and she screamed, *"Kill him now!"*

An instant later, a barrage of bolts flew from the Water dragons next to Solbright.

The bolts arced, smashing into the glowing wall, exploding in starbursts. But the wall stood unharmed.

Daerren fully bared his overlarge, jagged fangs. *"Being head of the dragon clans comes with its own knowledge and power."* He stomped one foot, and an earthquake shook the cavern. Rocks rained from the ceiling, turning into spikes. They accelerated, shooting in all directions, flying into dragons. While they merely bounced off of silver and brown scales to fly in the opposite direction, they impaled red-gold scales with wet crunches.

Screams of dragons and gouts of blue blood splashing onto red-gold wings turned the cavern into colored chaos. Several spikes flew at Solbright, but she didn't take her eyes off Daerren. Rivenwake gasped as the rock shards bounced off her.

With a roar, Solbright leaped into the air, spinning in a circle, sending a ring of flames flying out from her. *"I'm the One, and our time is come. Stand down, stand aside, or be ground underfoot."* She exploded in a flash and disappeared. Other dragons exploded in quick succession after her, turning the floor of the cavern into one flaming mass. Scattered screams echoed as dragons collected injuries even while leaving.

Though he had to talk to Daerren, Rivenwake needed to be seen leaving so he could keep his cover. In a flashing explosion, he left the cavern, darting through the Mag to a lake he frequently haunted. He swam one slow lap before slipping back to the cavern. Only three dragons remained now: Daerren and the huge Fire and Water dragons who'd shown up at the last second.

Rivenwake crept toward them, recognizing the old and wise Sturmcrest, his silver head tipping in respect as he acknowledged Rivenwake. On Daerren's other side, Lasair stretched her neck and flared her gorgeous red-gold wings. Though dried blood still sat on Daerren's leg, only a faint scar showed through his scales, and Rivenwake relaxed a little. He sensed the three dragons' discussion but politely stayed out of it.

After a few minutes, Daerren tipped his head towards Sturmcrest and Lasair. They bowed, fully touching their chins to the ground. Lasair disappeared in a shower of sparks and a racy show of underbelly. Sturmcrest shook his head and vanished a moment later in a splash of water, with just a whisper of implosion. Rivenwake stepped forward, a respectable few dragon-lengths away, and dropped his own chin to the floor.

"Enough of that." Daerren's thoughts rumbled but sounded tired. "Thanks for your warnings. I've heard similar tales but didn't necessarily believe them. I don't know what Solbright's become, but she's not a dragon anymore."

"Even more importantly, I'm still meeting with her tomorrow back at her cavern, as planned." Rivenwake carefully kept the fear out of his mind.

Daerren looked him in the eye. "Your choice, of course—especially now that we truly know the dangers. But your information is invaluable. The time is coming soon when whatever Solbright's planning won't matter, and we won't need you risking yourself to stay ahead of her."

Rivenwake nodded and flicked his tail. "I look forward to that day. For now, I'll keep the meeting. I just wanted to make sure you were unharmed." He bowed again, backing away as he readied to leave.

"I'm fine, but that was a close one, wasn't it?" Daerren's voice wavered. "You don't have to rush off. I've been thinking..."

Rivenwake whipped his head up to look at Daerren. A spurt of bright blue flew past the corner of his eye. He darted a look at Daerren's leg and saw the wound had reopened.

Daerren looked over his shoulder at the wound, and he pulled one lip up, showing craggy fangs. "I guess I'm not so fine." Then his eyes rolled back and he fell over, crashing to the ground like a rockslide.

Rivenwake leaped to his side, pouring healing energy as he blurred across the cavern.

CHAPTER 3

ASKING

Haylwen watched Cadarn as he held the Scepter of Kings in one hand, spinning it back and forth quickly. About as long as his arm, the movement made the Scepter look like a giant silver microphone, somehow reflecting more light than was actually in the room. She glanced at the speaking man, whose name she'd already forgotten. He droned on, talking like dealing with the "dragon problem" deserved as much emotion as getting rid of a couple of houseflies loose in the kitchen. At least this one hadn't laughed when Cadarn said he was king.

Cadarn, his eyebrows narrowed, nodding occasionally, looked like he was paying close attention. To be king, he had to do all the kingly duties, like listen to these status reports. But Haylwen heard his thoughts, and knew he felt both overwhelmed and frustrated. He'd stopped listening after the first sentence.

Both their parents, however, stared intently at the man as he outlined his reasons for the king to help him immediately. Their mother scribbled notes while their father tapped his index fingers together, the rest of his fingers steeped in front of his face. When the man finished, everyone thanked him, and he left.

Before Haylwen could sigh in relief, a man and woman, holding hands, stepped in. The woman curtsied, her eyes on the floor, as the man looked around the room, then stopped, his gaze resting on Haylwen's father. He nodded, facing Haylwen's parents, and opened his mouth to speak.

Cadarn sighed and cut him off. "Hello, Christoph, nice to finally meet you. This must be your wife, Stephanie. I've heard about the good work you two do. I'm the king, by the way." He waived the Scepter in front of the man's now stricken face. "In case you wondered, these are my Right and Left Hands," he added, gesturing to Haylwen and Nacia, "and yes, they do look young. Unless you have any other questions, please give your report."

Christoph's cheeks flushed red for a moment as his jaw snapped shut. Stephanie flashed him a quick glance before dropping her head back down. Cadarn started spinning the Scepter of Kings again. Haylwen used a touch of magic to flick a bolt of light at the Scepter. The beam bounced off, flashing Christoph in the eyes. He blinked and twitched his head away.

"Haylwen, stop that," Cadarn thought to her.

"But this whole thing is a stupid waste of time." She knew it wasn't Cadarn's fault and she did feel sorry for him. He sounded so tired.

"Stupid or not, it's necessary. Kings must keep in touch with what is going on." He nodded, gesturing to Christoph, who licked his lips and started his report.

"He could've just sent an email or a text," Haylwen thought.

"They don't do email."

"Fine, write a memo."

"Stop talking to me, I'm listening to this guy."

"I can tell you what he is going to say." Haylwen mimicked Christoph's tense voice. *"Unexplained fires are popping up all over. Local temperatures are higher than expected. Animal populations, especially large or domestic, are dropping. Missing person reports have increased tenfold. Reported sightings and massive destruction, but no documented images of dragons. I request immediate assistance from the king."*

Christoph spoke for some time, giving a detailed report of everything happening in his region. Haylwen smirked, noting she'd summarized the report perfectly.

"In conclusion, I have my best people working on it, but have no recommendations." Christoph flicked his eyes from Cadarn to their parents. *"Considering the implications, I request immediate assistance from the king."*

"Told you," Haylwen thought.

"You missed the part about having his best people working on it." Cadarn stared at the Scepter as he spun it back and forth. *"If you're going to be snarky, I can excuse you."*

Haylwen sighed. *"No, if you're going to stay, I should too."*

Cadarn looked at Christoph and gave the same answer he'd given the previous five people. *"Thank you for your report. The crown appreciates your dedication and service. We will send help immediately."*

Christoph ducked his head, throwing a glance at their parents, but they didn't do more than nod. Haylwen knew they would've liked to do more but wanted to keep all focus on Cadarn.

Christoph's wife looked up at him, then from Cadarn to Haylwen to their parents. Haylwen's heart twinged, finally seeing Stephanie's red-rimmed eyes and drawn face. *"Our home was destroyed, where will we live? Our two little children..."* Her voice trailed off as tears poured down her cheeks. Christoph put his arm around her and whispered in her ear.

Haylwen's heart broke, and she felt her own eyes fill with tears. She remembered how it felt to be dragged from home to home. Their poor kids didn't even have a home anymore.

"Why didn't you say so?" Cadarn didn't wait for an answer to his quiet question. *"You can't stay here, the Castle may not be secure for much longer. But we have a network to help people in similar situations. Go across the hall. Lucinda will coordinate the closest safe house."*

The man and woman thanked Cadarn profusely, then scurried out of the room.

After the door closed behind them, Cadarn let his head fall. "That's the last one, right?"

Haylwen's mother murmured, "The last one for today."

Still with his head bowed, Cadarn flicked a finger and muttered "sgiath," and a bubble flew out to encase the room. Haylwen shivered as the energy flowed through her.

Cadarn stood to pace around the room. "I feel like I've failed everyone."

Their father looked up sharply. "Failed? So you're quitting?"

Cadarn took a breath, stopping to face his parents. "Definitely not." He held up a hand. "I know, I know. As long as you never quit, you can never fail. I'm not quitting.

But what should I do?"

Haylwen jumped up. "I know what to do. We need to ratify the king. We have to gather the Others, starting with the Queen of the Hidden. We need to convince her to vote for Cadarn."

"It's a good thought." Their mother shifted, tapping her pen on her notepad. "But the ratification of the king has to wait. We need to fight back against the dragons, and we'll need every magic user to do that. We'll need to convince the nobles to join us first. There aren't enough nobles truly convinced they should follow Cadarn—or anyone—into a confrontation."

"They're scared and only thinking of themselves." Haylwen gestured toward the door Christoph and Stephanie had just left through. "And with good reason. But I know ratifying the king is bigger—"

"I'm afraid your mother is right," their father interrupted. "Our immediate problem is the dragons. The Hidden are a huge unknown, and spending any resources on trying to gain them as allies subtracts resources from a limited supply. Once we've gathered the nobles to follow us, they'll lead the other magic users, and we can get the dragons under control. Then we can take care of formalities."

Haylwen set her jaw and looked at their parents. "And if the nobles drag their heels, we'll lose the Castle. I'll bet once they see a ratified king, all the magic users will be convinced."

Their father looked from Haylwen to Cadarn. "We can advise, but this is really a king's decision."

Cadarn jerked his head back, but then he blinked and nodded once. He looked at Nacia. "Should Haylwen go to the Hidden?"

She looked back, raised an eyebrow, and then shook her head. "Don't look at me," she said, raising one hand. "I'm only here because you asked me to come. You said I have good ideas, but I have no clue about any of this political stuff." She set her jaw. "And I'm not sure I want to know."

Cadarn looked around the room and narrowed his eyes as his gaze landed on Haylwen. A momentary twinge of guilt jabbed her as she really saw Cadarn's drawn

face, the dark bags under his eyes. He was only a couple of years older than her but looked like he'd aged years in the past several months. His stare, eyebrows furrowed, seemed to be searching for something.

Doubts prickled in Haylwen's stomach. Would leaving to find the Hidden help, or was she just running away from the dangerous situation here? She didn't think so, and she didn't know what to do to help the situation, even if she stayed. She held her conviction like a torch in the dark. It would all work out.

Cadarn broke his look to glance around the room. "I'd be foolish to ignore Haylwen's ideas. Besides, the last time someone told her not to do something, she did it anyway. I might as well order her to do something she's going to do regardless."

Haylwen tried to hide her grin as a thrill trickled through her. At last, she'd get to do something really important. She just knew talking to the Queen of the Hidden was the right thing to do.

"In all seriousness, I think Haylwen's onto something." Cadarn's face relaxed as he turned to their parents. "As long as you two are okay with it, I'll send her to Hidland to talk to the Queen."

Haylwen held her breath as their parents exchanged a look. "She'd probably be safer with the Queen of the Hidden than getting into trouble here," their mother said to their father. Haylwen sighed and beamed as her father nodded slowly.

Cadarn smiled at Haylwen, then held up a finger. "Dad's right, though, you can only take a few people or Guardians, and we can't spare much else. But if you hurry, you can catch a ride with Taraweta and Mbuku and save some time and effort."

Haylwen's stomach fell. "Go with Taraweta? But I was thinking maybe—"

Cadarn's voice dropped. "No, it's perfect. They'll get you right there, quickly. And I want to be sure Taraweta and Mbuku leave and never come back."

Haylwen's neck tightened, and a headache started. She'd have to go with Taraweta and her brother Mbuku? Her image of a luxurious ride to another castle blew up. She'd heard the "exchange students," who'd turned out to be members of the ultra-secretive Hidden race, had come here by camel.

Just thinking about the siblings, Haylwen's face burned. They'd stolen Cadarn's wish wand from her back pocket, and she would have to pretend to be friends with them as she traveled. If she couldn't keep her temper in check, she'd ruin her brother's chances at being king. And if Cadarn wasn't ratified, and quickly... who knew what would happen then?

Trying to ignore the bubbling doubts in her stomach, she gritted her teeth and scowled. She wasn't escaping a dangerous situation, but charging off into one.

CHAPTER 4

TRAVEL

Haylwen trotted down the hall toward the Guardians' area as the Castle muttered to her in the back of her mind. She didn't understand all of the words but didn't need to know the specifics.

Yesterday, the dragon attack on the Castle had started.

Every step brought another reminder that a full-on attack could happen at any time. The smell of burnt plastic and sharp tang, Haylwen now knew as the grenades the silver suits used. Black scorches ran along the carpet and through wall hangings. The dragons seemed to be trying to wear down the silver suit and Guardian defenses. Or maybe just toying with them.

Haylwen hadn't slept at all last night, too worried to close her eyes. Could she get to the Hidden and back before the dragons took over the Castle? She needed to find someone to go with her, and fast.

Haylwen took another left turn. She passed by two scorched wall hangings and didn't look at the stain in the carpet. Just spilled food, she prayed. She took a sharp right and sped up to dash down an access hallway, clean of debris and empty, as Cadarn had ordered the staff away for their safety.

A noise behind her caught her attention, and Haylwen threw a look over her shoulder. Half-in and half-out of the wall, a silver suit and a blond woman wearing a yellow dress were grappling.

Haylwen gasped. The blond had red-gold horns, just like a dragon's, jutting out of her forehead. When Faustas and Cadarn had fought over the kingship, a dragon appeared in the throne room to attack everyone. Haylwen thought a blond girl had transformed into the dragon. This blond must be a dragon, too.

Her hands, covered in flames, pounded on the silver suit but bounced off his shining helmet without leaving a mark. She smiled as her teeth grew into fangs. "Give up now, and I'll make it quick."

"Never." The silver suit's voice sounded weak and tinny, and Haylwen felt he didn't have any magical ability.

Taking a breath, Haylwen shot a fireball at the blond, small but with a lot of force. It struck her in the head, scorching her hair and snapping her head to the side. The fireball bounced off, hit the wall, and exploded into a shower of flames. The silver suit burst into a flurry of punches and kicks, breaking the woman's hold on him, and leaped away.

Haylwen threw a portal in front of him. “Quick, get out of here.” He stepped through, and Haylwen snapped the portal shut behind him.

“That’s a trade up.” The blond walked toward her, horns lengthening and a spiked tail shooting out behind her. “Killing a magic user instead of a worthless silver monkey.”

Haylwen pulled energy through her wish wand, throwing it out like a fire hose. The energy struck the woman—no, the *dragon*—in the chest and shot her away, down the hall. Haylwen opened a portal as the dragon flew back, tail whipping, and disappeared into the portal, her eyes and mouth wide.

Haylwen snapped the portal closed and sprinted down the hall to the double energy barrier outside the Guardians’ area. Dragons could track their way back through portals, so she didn’t have much time to get through the energy barriers. Put in place to protect the Guardians from sneak attacks, the barriers would protect her, too, if she could get past them quickly enough.

Haylwen closed her eyes and touched the first energy barrier. Once recognized by the magic users holding the shields, she passed through both barriers, throwing a look back down the hall as she slid through. Nothing. She slumped to catch her breath, hands on knees. The silver suit would report the dragon sighting. Nothing for Haylwen to do now but get Vora and go to the Hidden.

Inside the barrier a few paces further down the hall, two Guardians came out of the doors to the Guardian's training room. Polluxa and Astrid snapped their fists to their stomachs when Haylwen walked up to them. Both from the group she had rescued from being burned alive by dragons, they were ferociously loyal.

“Your smell is welcome, Big-in-Little,” Astrid said.

Haylwen stood up, waving her hands back and forth. “Your noise is peace, but don’t call me that.”

Polluxa’s mouth twitched, and Haylwen knew they were teasing her. She didn’t mind the teasing—that’s just what friends did—but she glanced around anyway, to make sure it wasn’t overheard. She still hadn’t told anyone she’d transformed into one of the giant, muscle-bound Guardians to lead the battle against the dragons in the throne room. No one had asked her about it, hopefully because no one had noticed. There’d been a lot going on. Transforming yourself wasn’t against the rules, exactly, but apparently the only person alive who knew how to do it was Faustas. Not a single magic book she’d looked through even mentioned the ability.

“Where’s Vora?” Haylwen asked as she reached for the door handle.

Polluxa beat her to it and opened the door for her. “Working with Zed-one.”

Haylwen scanned the room, seeing Vora amongst the numerous Guardians scattered in small groups around the room.

Haylwen trotted over, waving.

“How would you like to come with me on a mission?” She grinned up at Vora, craning her neck.

But Vora’s face fell, and she looked away.

Haylwen shifted, trying to see Vora’s eyes. Especially after having taken the form of a Guardian for a while, Vora’s rhinoceros-like head didn’t seem odd to Haylwen, but did make it tough to keep eye contact.

“Oh, of course, come with you.” Vora’s long eyelashes flashed as she blinked, only glancing at Haylwen before looking away again. Her jaw muscles jumped.

Haylwen followed Vora’s gaze to where Zed-one stood talking to three other Guardians she recognized from Vora’s new clan. Her heart sank.

Vora didn’t want to go. And why should she? Vora and the rest of her clan were just getting to know their kids. Haylwen couldn’t really drag Vora off now, and couldn’t ask any of the young Guardians to come for the same reason.

But they might want to, if she just asked, right? Haylwen argued with herself for a moment, her fear battling her compassion. Vora clenched and unclenched her jaw.

But Haylwen couldn’t go charging off by herself, could she? Would she have to abandon her trip to the Hidden, or risk it and go alone? The look on Vora’s face, the giant trying to hide her disappointment, broke Haylwen’s heart.

“You know,” Haylwen said, tapping her lip, “it’s probably better for you to guard the Castle. I’ll find someone else.” Vora sighed, smiled, and nodded. Haylwen slipped out of the room, racing back the way she’d come, flying through the Castle and skidding to a stop just inside the king’s offices.

Cadarn and their father looked exhausted, dark circles under their eyes. Cadarn’s fingers flew over a computer keyboard as their father sifted through a heap of reports on the desk. Their mother sat behind them, talking on two phones at once, trying to organize the Conclave to lead and mobilize all magic users. In the background, a TV showed a news station with some big-shot no-mu scientist trying to explain how a lake could have tides strong enough to destroy houses along the shoreline. Haylwen couldn’t believe the no-mus still denied the existence of dragons.

Cadarn and their parents looked up for a moment before going back to work. Haylwen tiptoed over to where Cadarn busily typed into a computer, and spoke to him quietly. “Do you know where Tommy or Nacia is? I’m taking them with me to the Hidden.”

Cadarn looked up, but didn’t move his hands from the keyboard. His voice low, he started listing defensive positions, political maneuvers, and power struggles to her like they were a shopping list he’d memorized. “And that’s why Nacia, Tommy, and, in fact, every strong magic user with clout needs to stay here.”

Haylwen’s scowl settled on her face long before Cadarn had finished. “But I can’t go alone.”

“Take the twins,” their father said without looking up from the report in his lap.

Their mother, talking on the phone behind him, looked at Haylwen, pointed at her husband, and nodded, all without a break in her rhythm.

"I don't want to bother the twins," Haylwen mumbled. She loved them, but the twins' magic wasn't very powerful. She'd be barely better off with them than going by herself.

"No," their mother said into one of the phones, "I strongly advise against nominating another king."

Haylwen sighed and walked to the door. Her misgivings about her ability grew like pricklescrinch. Taking a breath, Haylwen cleared herself of her biting doubts for the hundredth time. Everyone had problems, and this one was hers.

Even more so now, she knew she needed to quickly get the Queen of the Hidden to vote for Cadarn. She'd try to find the twins, but if necessary, she'd go alone.

CHAPTER 5

SENT

Solbright's frustration poured out in hot rage as she paced and fumed. Her footsteps and thrashing tail sent dust floating up, and when it hit her bright scales it smoldered, disappearing in wisps of smoke that helped her think as she paced through the cavern. The snippets of intelligence from inside the Castle proved her caution wise, but she chafed at the delay in her plans. This latest bit of information about the human king going to the Hidden truly threatened her success.

If only she could have killed Daerren, taken control of all of the dragons, the Castle would be easy. She'd been so close. She knew he would die—when she caught the glimpse of her future in the Flow, she'd *seen* herself obliterate him. She closed her eyes, recalling the vision. The details were fuzzy, but she saw her blast, Daerren resisting, and then his resistance vanishing. The elation she would feel when he fell thrummed, calming her. She paused, then shook herself, settling her scales. Perhaps the delay was good. Now that Daerren had been warned, she could use any means to kill him without traditionalists complaining.

Plots grew in her mind, curling and morphing like the swirling smoke. She walked down the tunnel and into the adjoining enormous cavern. She paused, gazing at the far wall unseen in the hazy distance, the ceiling arching impossibly high, giving off a diffuse light. Several large flights of dragons crossed the expanse, and other groups lounged on the ground. The cavern sparkled with dragons.

Solbright considered just overwhelming the opposition. She might be able to win with sheer numbers. But that new king, with Chuck backing him, worried her. She needed a bit more patience and someone she could use, someone to take the risks for her, who she could throw away once the job was done. Somewhere out there was a dragon who would be the tool to accomplish her ends.

What if news of the king going to the Hidden was a sign the Castle should fall before Daerren? A plan was unfolding, details still eluding her, when a glint of silver in the distance caught her eye. Brilliant! Her plans snapped into clarity; she'd known infecting Rivenwake would be more than just an experiment.

She crouched and leaped up towards the distant cavern ceiling, extending her wings fully. Hunting like she was born to, she soared above the ground. Finding her prey, she dove in. She waited until she was almost upon him before sending her thoughts. *"Rivenwake, there you are. I'm glad to see you."*

The silver dragon spun to face her, flattening on the floor. She flapped hard, landing with a thump and sending clouds of dust over him, dulling his shining scales.

Rivenwake fixed his blue eyes on Solbright while dropping his chin, touching it to the floor. *"How may I help you?"*

"So formal?" Solbright laughed. *"But I'm here to ask for your help. I hear humans will be sending an envoy to secure the allegiance of the Queen of the Hidden. We, of course, want the Queen of the Hidden on our side. I would like you to go with the envoy and report what happens. You still have some influence with the king, correct?"*

Rivenwake nodded slowly. *"You only wish a report of what happens?"*

Solbright nodded, adjusting her wings. *"I've my own connections to the Queen, so I'll follow up."* She waited, savoring the moment before continuing. *"But after that, I'll need Daerren to step down."*

Rivenwake's face didn't flinch, and Solbright didn't even try to read his thoughts. He'd proved too skilled in mental defense, and she could guess them well enough for this part of the game.

Solbright raised one front foot to look at her claws. *"As you know, I tried to convince him to step down earlier. I might have underestimated him. But that doesn't mean he shouldn't step down, to make way for the new age."* She fixed her eyes on Rivenwake firmly. *"As you can see from my ever-growing numbers, the tide against him—and any foolish enough to stand with him—is overwhelming. I would hate to have another civil war come of this. Don't you agree?"*

Rivenwake paused, but then nodded slowly, dropping his eyes to the floor. His head snapped up, and he took a step back as Sheela swooped in to land next to Solbright, eyes darting back and forth between them.

Solbright froze her daughter with a quick look before swinging her head back to Rivenwake. *"After you return from the Hidden, I hope you'll help convince Daerren to abdicate. You'll do that, won't you?"* Solbright ignored Sheela's flinch and kept Rivenwake pinned under her stare.

Rivenwake flicked his eyes from Solbright to Sheela as he shifted from foot to foot. *"That's a weighty responsibility. All due respect, are you sure I'm the right—"*

"I'm sure." Solbright smiled. *"You'll find a way. That's another reason to send you to visit the Queen of the Hidden. After you talk with her, you'll be convinced I'm right."* She shot a wisp of fire out of her nose at him.

Rivenwake smoothly twisted his head aside, barely avoiding the flames, but didn't even blink. Solbright almost laughed at his amazing self-control. Breaking him was going to be such fun.

"May I think about it?" Rivenwake murmured.

"Of course, take your time." Solbright smiled and flicked her tail dismissively. *"Now run along, and let me know when the king finally decides to go."*

Rivenwake bowed his head and leaped into a spinning silver spiral that imploded into tinkling shards.

Sheela stared at Solbright. *"You're letting Rivenwake live?"* She blinked several times. *"Wait, I can figure this out. You're sending him to report on the Hidden. And then he'll try to convince Daerren to step down?"*

Solbright whipped her tail, smacking Sheela. *"You must look beneath the simple and learn to think deviously. Solutions spring out, and you'll have more fun."* Sheela was young, but was she really that slow? Solbright's eyes flashed, and she felt the hard rock give way under her claws. *"I don't care if Rivenwake reports—I don't need him, I'm using him. And no, I'm not going to convince Daerren. I'm going to kill him."*

"But there's no way Daerren'll let us near him now." Sheela's whine almost earned her another smack.

Solbright took a breath. Sheela must be more intelligent than that; intelligence is inherited. She just needed more information, that's all. *"Once I get the king and Castle, he'll come to us."* Solbright paused, forcing a vision of the Flows to return. *"I see Flows merging here. Kill the human girl, and remove all doubt about who is the One while I take over the Hidden. Then the king will be mine, the Castle will follow, and Daerren will have to grovel before I kill him."*

Sheela just blinked, so Solbright quickly reminded her of the several layers of her plan one more time. *"See? Even if I don't get the vote of the Queen of the Hidden, plan B will work just fine. Never leave anything to chance or luck."*

Sheela started to mutter something about Rivenwake, and Solbright smacked her firmly, knocking Sheela's head to the ground. *"Using Rivenwake to set Daerren up is just for fun. Sometimes your enemies can do more for you than your friends."* She looked at Sheela, who still looked confused, and took another deep breath, then settled into a more comfortable position. *"Listen to the full brilliance of my plan yet again, and this time try to follow along."*

CHAPTER 6

PLANS

Haylwen ran down the Castle halls, blue bubble bouncing around her, a fireball at the ready. Her eyes darted into every shadow. Fear nipped at her heels, and frustration bubbled just under control. The Castle whispered to her almost constantly, but low, quiet, and in words that didn't make sense. Dragons had invaded, she'd caught that much, but she already knew about their sneak attacks. Haylwen blocked the words out—understanding the Castle had to wait.

Not only did Haylwen need to win the loyalty of the Hidden, she needed to hurry. But just thinking about the Hidden she knew, Taraweta and Mbuku, made her stomach churn. That they had masqueraded as exchange students didn't bug her. She didn't really care if they looked like giant, hippo-headed sumo wrestlers. But she'd thought they could be her friends, and instead they'd manipulated her, set her up so they could steal Cadarn's wish wand. They hadn't really lied, just played her for a fool. Now she'd have to pretend to be nice.

Haylwen slid to a stop, peeking around a corner before turning down the hallway. Would the twins come with her? Who else could she ask? Rivenwake's face floated in front of her mind's eye, and her heart jumped and fell. She had to figure out if he felt as much for her as she did for him. But this trip would be a terrible way to do that.

Her pace picked up a little as she turned the last corner, cutting back down the hall toward the meeting room.

Either Oakren or Doakren might work—they were inseparable, though, so they'd both have to come. Haylwen had only seen the twins briefly a couple times since they'd Cleared the pricklescrinch together, but each time she'd reconnected to them like they had known each other forever. The twins were no Guardians, but they'd really filled out. On the other hand, Haylwen didn't sense Oakren and Doakren as strong magic users, and they were both busy. Dragging them away from rebuilding the house Chuck had destroyed to capture her family felt selfish.

Haylwen turned the last corner and skidded to a halt. A figure was loitering outside the door to the meeting room.

Just before throwing a fireball, she recognized Rivenwake. She dropped the fire, her face heating as her heart stumbled over itself.

Rivenwake took a couple steps toward her. He smiled, and Haylwen couldn't help smiling back, but she quickly dropped it. Why had he just disappeared during the dragon attack? If he really felt something—anything—for her, shouldn't he have at least called to make sure she was okay?

Her feelings for him were strong, but even before the dragon attack, he'd been acting oddly. Maybe he wasn't who she thought he was.

Rivenwake's smile slid into a hard mask, and his eyes glinted intensely. "I need to talk to you."

"Oh?" Haylwen crossed her arms.

"It is of the utmost urgency that I come with you."

"You'd have to ask the king." Haylwen didn't bother asking how Rivenwake knew where she was going. Nobles spread rumors better than middle-schoolers. "And he's pretty busy. I don't know if he'd even have time to hear your request before it's time for us to go." Haylwen's heart jumped at the look of dismay that flashed across Rivenwake's face, and she scolded herself. He didn't really care for her, only the mission.

Rivenwake's face softened, and his voice dropped. "It's really important that I come along. Is there not something you could do?"

His eyes shone a bright and clear blue like a warm summer sky, and Haylwen fell into them. Her gaze drifted to his full lips, and her resolve weakened as she remembered the feel of his lips on hers.

The sound of the door to the meeting room opening tore Haylwen's eyes from Rivenwake. In the doorway stood Taraweta, looking like the human foreign-exchange student Haylwen first met. Haylwen blinked, surprised the Hidden girl didn't look like the giant, hippo-headed magic user she really was. Haylwen again regretted not being able to bring a Guardian along.

"Hello, Haylwen," Taraweta said with a big smile, teeth shining white against her dark skin.

Haylwen clenched her teeth and tried to smile back. That Taraweta and Mbuku didn't seem to feel any guilt or show any remorse for using her made their betrayal even worse.

"Please introduce me to your friend." Taraweta stepped to stand right in front of Rivenwake.

"I am Rivenwake, honor and peace to you," he said, bowing. "I was just asking Haylwen if I could join the expedition to Hidland to meet the Queen of the Hidden."

Taraweta beamed and nodded her head. "A brilliant notion. It will be dangerous travel. Haylwen bringing friends with her is a good idea."

Before Haylwen could figure out if Rivenwake was even her friend, he was replying. "I agree, keeping Haylwen safe is important." He smiled.

Haylwen felt like her insides were going to explode, and her Ring of Fire heated, searing her finger. Who did Rivenwake think he was? Then Taraweta's words sank in, and Haylwen burst out with questions. "How are we traveling? Can't we just portal there? How long will it take?"

She suppressed a shiver as Taraweta's smile broadened but went sharp, her eyes narrowing. "Oh, no. We don't allow portaling anywhere near our sacred lands. Only walking."

"Walk?" Haylwen changed her mind about how bad a camel would be. "We can't possibly walk. You mean drive, right?"

For the first time Haylwen could remember, Taraweta frowned. "Drive, like a car? No, cars pollute the earth. We came by magic carpet. It only took half a moon."

Haylwen studied Taraweta's face, trying to find a joke. She couldn't be serious—half a moon? Did that mean half a month?

"I might be able to offer a solution." Rivenwake held a palm up to Taraweta. "My family has access to gliders, which use no external power."

Haylwen spun to look at him, grateful, frustrated, and hopeful, all at the same time. He'd be able to get them there quickly, but she didn't want him to come along. She did want to see more of him, just not on this trip, not until he'd explained himself. Her heart flip-flopped in confusion.

Taraweta pursed her lips and nodded. "That would be acceptable. We would still have to land away from the border of Hidland's sacred forest and walk the rest of the way."

Now Rivenwake *had* to come along. And they would still have to walk all the way through a forest to wherever the Hidden palace was. A camping trip with Rivenwake... But she was on a mission. She didn't know if she could trust Rivenwake, or herself. Now Haylwen really wanted someone else to come along, and the twins would be perfect.

"Two of my friends will be joining us, as well," Haylwen blurted out.

Rivenwake's attention snapped to her. "Which friends might these be?"

"Two guys I know." She glanced into his face, and then away. Was he jealous? Her heart tried to leap out of being reasonable.

"Can they be trusted?" Taraweta's eyes narrowed.

"Absolutely." Haylwen fixed her eyes on Taraweta's. "I can't imagine either of them lying or stealing, or anything terrible like that."

Taraweta nodded, showing no sign she'd caught Haylwen's dig.

"It is settled, then. Five of us will travel to Hidland and see if the Queen will hear us. I will arrange the invitations."

"Five?" Taraweta and Mbuku had come with their parents, so Haylwen counted eight.

Taraweta spread her hands. "My brother and parents already left to make the journey. There are other issues in the land and much to do."

Haylwen felt her mouth go dry. A picture she'd seen on the news of a bombed-out city flashed across her mind. What kind of situation were they heading into?

Rivenwake ducked his head. "The gliders can carry three each, so five is fine. When shall we leave?"

"Tomorrow." Taraweta looked between Rivenwake and Haylwen. "As I said, issues demand that we finish this business as quickly as possible. You know what it is like, being a leader of people, carrying honor and responsibility on your shoulders. A noble and challenging calling."

"I will go arrange for the gliders' preparation." Rivenwake ducked his head at each of them. Had his eyes flashed when they'd caught hers? Haylwen's breath caught, and he spun to leave before she could start breathing again.

Haylwen broke off staring after him to look at Taraweta. For a second, it almost looked like Taraweta wanted to say something, but changed her mind.

"I'd better go get ready, too." Haylwen backed away and left with a wave. She didn't have time to figure Taraweta out right now. Flinging up a bubble, she broke into a sprint and flew to her bedroom.

She had to find the twins and convince them to come with her. Earlier, their coming along had seemed nice, but not needed. Now, with Rivenwake and Taraweta going, the twins became mandatory. Haylwen's mind raced, doubts running amok, and she tried to focus. She'd stick with her original story about wanting help on a camping trip through a dangerous country with a betraying monster.

No reason to mention making the cute boy jealous.

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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.

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Dear Noble Reader,

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