

**FIVE IN CIRCLE**  
THE FIVE IN CIRCLE SERIES

C. H. MACLEAN

FIVE IN CIRCLE– First 6 Chapters - PDF

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For you, who knows that dreams come right after you enter darkness, and let 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

### OH, ANCIENT SPEAKER

**Readjusting her wings, Lasair** hunkered down along the rocky ridge with the other young dragons to observe the Gathering of Guidants. Humans sat around them, a small knot, apparently relaxed but still shielded. Lasair, told she was talented and sensitive enough times to believe it herself, caught the edge of fear and something darker wisping up from a few of the humans. She knew it was part of the humans' nature. A part of their history, unfortunately supported by the dragons' prior ill treatment of them. It would be hard to be a prey species without fearing and mistrusting a predator, even the rational and civilized dragons.

Lasair shivered. Her impressions would be discussed later, adding to the dragons' lore. She so loved being included in the Gathering of Guidants. The Gathering, partly her own idea, allowed a forum for both species to vent their fears, discuss their problems, and get past their obvious differences. The human use of magic, crude and woefully limited, still proved powerful and different enough to be a contending force. Random magic users were popping up in a blindingly fast generational turnover of startling power and creativity, keeping the dragons motivated to maintain peaceable interactions. A few dragons still whispered the names of Run and Cu-Ran in either reverence or terror.

So Lasair and a few of her friends sat back on the ridge, close enough to hear the discussion below, but far enough away to get a good view of the whole proceeding. A glint of gold flashed in her peripheral vision. Her well-trained brain immediately recognized a dragon, having slipped through the Mag, now heading straight toward them.

Flying slow and clumsily – injured, perhaps? – the newcomer caught Lasair's attention. As the dragon drew closer, Lasair caught it all. She had a long, toothy grin, and a ripple of a rainbow across her red-gold scales reflected the bright sun. Long streamers from her wings and decorations around her lips and jaw proved her ancient. Other dragons, especially males, noticed her too, and conversation dwindled away as everyone turned to watch her glide in. Even the humans finally looked up and around, noticing the way the dragons were reacting to the new addition.

Like many others, Lasair reached out to the new dragon with her mind, meeting a mental fortress of immeasurable strength and unique construction. Another oddity, adding to her mystique. A flurry of conversation passed among the thoughts of the dragons.

*Who is she?*

*That old, someone must know her.*

*Not if she's from Sidhe.*

*That's true—that old, she must be from the home world.*

*Whoever and wherever, why is she here, and why doesn't she say something?*

Underneath all the chatter, there was agreement among all the dragons present.

*She's magnificent.*

The mystery dragon swooped in and circled, as if teasing, but without any of the teasing move. Her streamers rippled musically, her scales ringing together and sending chimes whispering over the crowd. She circled once, twice, and then dropped into a landing a few steps away from the Gathering. She almost made it look clumsy. Maybe looking incapable was some sort of ancient flirting? Lasair didn't understand it and dismissed the idea. Not everything old deserved keeping, and looking as spectacular as this one did, anything could be attractive.

The ancient dragon walked toward the Gathering, head high and wings still flared, showing off without the look or energy of arrogance. Such skill; Lasair made mental notes.

She eventually settled her wings and let her tail drop as she approached the Gathering. The other dragons held their collective breath; no one knew her, and none dared be so rude as to speak aloud yet.

Oddly, she stopped near the side of the humans. She looked around at the dragons, meeting all with full eye contact, and nodded, but still said nothing. The mystery of her identity burned curiosity through every dragon. Murmurs fluttered amongst the dragons, but she took no notice.

Some greeted her respectfully. *"Great one, good meeting."*

She responded, *"Good meeting."* But like a floating boulder, she defied logic and didn't offer a traditional greeting or introduction. Then, the figurative boulder fell and exploded into feathers. She opened her mouth and spoke aloud, looking down at the humans. Dragons stared slack-jawed.

"Hear me well." Her voice, light and melodic, carried magic laced throughout. "Listen, remember, and pass along to the next generation this which I have to tell you. I speak of the future, of prophecy. This is as it will be, foretold." She paused as a tiny smile curved her lips. Then, with a faraway look, she continued.

"The One will drag us back in the world with humans again. One—from each of we the three—gifts she will need receive." She blinked slowly. "First, to a guardian cleave, then all others, binding three. Back and forth through worlds and time, 'til now is ruin—sublime." Her gaze fell on Lasair, sending a charge of energy across the gap. "Empties their thrones and their pride and all that we safely hide. To our world she brings new rage to return a golden age infinite to all and three."

As the dragon spoke, absolute silence fell across the area. Even the insects seemed to stop to listen. Hypnotic and rolling, her voice wormed its way into Lasair's

mind, painting a glow around the already spectacular dragon. Humans drifted closer, leaning in, as if her words were food and drink. Time seemed to stop in the Gathering.

Lasair's connection to the mystery dragon intensified the more the dragon spoke. Lasair knew that some would call her a bit vain. But being stunning had its practical applications. Then and there, deeper than a vow, a conviction to become as resplendent as this dragon settled within her.

The mystery dragon spoke for hours, and when she finally stopped, the absence of her voice felt as jarring as a waterfall suddenly evaporating.

With a shallow dip of her head, the stunning dragon took one last look around, and with a small smile, turned and walked away. She leaped, flapping hard as if she were in a great hurry, only slightly airborne before slipping through the Mag and disappearing.

Lasair stared for a while into the empty space left behind. The dragon had never even told them her name. She'd just shown up, spoken, and left. A tiny tremor ruffled Lasair's scales. The strange new dragon's mysteriousness only made her more attractive.

Lasair sighed and looked back to the Gathering. Humans were scrambling, scribbling on their little wisps of tree bark. Dragons were sharing a retelling and had several perspectives and analyses already rolled out. Three of the older dragons looked worried.

Lasair paused. She hadn't paid attention to the words much at all. Listening to the analyses, she felt her own connections to the Flows settle. Her excitement dwindled into worry. Some of the prophecies, like usual, told of doom. Some, like the first one, spoke of a new golden age. But why would a dragon give the prophecies to a room full of humans? She'd spoke directly to the humans, without a doubt. But what did that mean?

Fear and danger raised Lasair's neck scales, and she dug her claws reflexively into the earth. She'd always heard fear and danger were attractive in a way, but right now, she didn't believe it.

## CHAPTER 1

### GATHERING

**Haylwen looked at the crowd** filling the glade of the Dragonway. The grassy area in the middle of forest had always seemed large when she and her friends practiced magic and kung fu there. But now that all the Conclave nobility and powerful magic users Chuck had invited for the ratification of king filled the entire area, one of her favorite places felt cramped. The noise of the murmuring crowd filled the glade, and Haylwen felt all the looks at her like pelting rain. Now that they were all safe, everyone wanted to know what had just happened.

Haylwen touched the crown on her head and wondered the same thing herself.

In the heat of the moment, she'd listened to her instincts. But now, looking at all the faces staring at her in anger or disgust, she wondered if she'd gone crazy. Who was she to be king? How could she possibly prove herself?

Taraweta, still in her Hidden hippo form, stood a few paces away talking to Zed-one and Vora. After all she and the Hidden had been through, Haylwen respected Taraweta. The girl was Queen of the Hidden, and much younger than normal for the role. Her Queenship had been controverted, too, but old and wise members of the tribe had argued that drastically different times required drastically different leaders. Rapid change required fresh perspectives. It wasn't all that different from Haylwen's situation.

Haylwen didn't know what the other girl had done to prove herself as Queen. But when she thought of everything *she'd* done... Defeated Challenges to the Scepter by winning a duel not once, but twice. Battled multiple dragons. Saved the entire Hidden race. Even through her doubts, she had to admit she'd done a lot.

On the other hand, she'd made spectacular mistakes, too. She'd pulled the ancient king Faustas from history through time to defeat Chuck in her first Challenge, and had become the first king of all magic users to lose the Castle. Maybe she should slow down, think this whole king business over.

Faustas snapped his fingers in her face. "You ready to get started? Ask the Castle if she's fully powered."

Haylwen blinked at him. "Ask the Castle?"

"Ask her," he replied firmly.

Haylwen shook her head. "You talk about the Castle like it's alive." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she didn't think they were funny. Looking at Faustas's face, neither did he.

Faustas stepped in closer, his voice in a whisper. "You're the fully ratified king,

so I can finally unburden and tell you everything—the secret of kings, the connection to the Castle, everything. But for now, just know that yes, she’s alive." He shook his head. "The dragons tried to assure me she’s not, but their explanation doesn't make sense. A mind made from sand is still a mind, and she talks to me." He looked at her, searching her face with his eyes. "You still hear her, right?"

Like a hum in the back of her mind, Haylwen felt the Castle’s presence, the way she always had, like someone standing behind her. She nodded slowly at Faustas, the one person in the world she felt comfortable admitting all this to. A building, talking to her! The history books said he was crazy for hearing trees and buildings talking to him, but Haylwen knew that trees – at least, those of a Dragonway – were alive in the same way people were. Why not a Castle?

"Whether she’s alive or not isn’t everything." Faustas looked around, his voice dropping even lower, to barely audible. "The might of the Castle's power has been the difference between humans being slaves or not." He sliced a hand through the air. "I must tell you about all of that, but this isn’t the place. In any case, you should reclaim the Castle first. Link to the Castle, fully integrate, and oust Solbright, then we can clean up the rest of her dragons easily."

"We can't." Haylwen felt like she was sinking, a mastodon in a tar pit. "I tried – I mean, the Castle and I tried to contain that giant dragon. We put a shield around her, but she was too powerful. She broke out. The Castle advised retreat or self-destruction. I had to get everyone to safety."

As Haylwen spoke, Faustas's eyebrows rose higher and higher, his hand reaching up to tug at his mustache. "When we portaled, I wondered if an error would occur in your connection with the Castle." He looked into the distance, speaking slowly. "I'll need to think about this. We should have a little time, a couple days, while Solbright celebrates. Mayhaps Daerren will know."

Haylwen glanced around, guilt twinging her. When they’d fled the Castle, she’d left Daerren and Rivenwake behind, forgetting they were dragons, too. Her mind still balked at the idea.

Faustas turned back to Haylwen, eyes blazing in his earnest face. "But if we need to storm the Castle and take it back by force, then we must do so. In truth, all we really need is you, Daerren, and a few powerful magic users."

Haylwen pulled her head back. "Against that many dragons?"

Faustas smiled. "I really need to share the secret of kings with you."

"In a sec," Haylwen said. "Let me collect my Guardians and as many Hidden as I can find. Then, let’s see how many human magic users I can gather. With that group, we should be able to win the Castle back, no matter what’s going on."

"As long as you get them quickly, king, I suppose an overwhelming force doesn’t hurt." Faustas bowed slightly, but his neck and jaw tightened.

Haylwen gestured, and Taraweta, Zed-one, and Vora leaped to her side. She

sketched the plan out for them.

Taraweta blinked. "I will go ask my people." She galloped off, her pounding footsteps fading into the forest.

Haylwen's eyes landed on Zed-one, and his rumbling bass responded. "All of my troops—"

Vora chimed in. "And my clan too."

Zed-one nodded and continued. "All would happily volunteer for this mission." His jaw muscles jumped, the sound of his teeth grinding sounded like scraping stones. "However, they are scattered already. We would happily throw ourselves at this, but I must tell you, everyone needs a Guardian. Magic users—powerful and not, Conclave and lay—are being targeted and destroyed. My suggestion is to take a squad or two from a non-magic user position."

"Sounds fair," Haylwen said.

Zed-one tapped his front horn with a giant finger. "Best would be Kay-two's team. They've not had a single contact."

"Can they portal here now?" Haylwen twisted her face. They had taken such pains to sneak Kay-two and the other Guardians into the research and development facility Tommy now owned.

Zed-one shook his head. "I cannot find a magic user that has been where he is to portal them out. Finding a truck to move them could take some time, a few days or so."

Haylwen could sense Faustas tensing up. "We don't have much time. You've been there, right? I can portal, if you let me."

Zed-one glanced at Vora, the whites of his eyes stark against his gray skin. Vora touched his arm. "This is Haylwen. It won't be like with Chuck," she murmured. Zed-one rolled his giant head once, then sat down.

Sitting, he was about eye-level. Haylwen met his gaze, then went past to touch his mind. After an initial flinch, his mental barriers opened, stepping aside like a gentleman opening a door. She respectfully picked up memories like she wore velvet gloves, finding one of him and Kay-two exchanging shoulder smacks as they toured the weapons R&D facility. She took in the sense of the place, its sights and smells, and put herself into them. With the barest thought, she opened the portal. Mentally bowing to him, she left Zed-one's mind and blinked back to reality. The portal hovered next to her.

With the noise of the crowd as a reminder, she connected mentally to Cadarn and Nacia. "*I have to leave for a minute, start getting ready to take back the Castle.*" She broke the connection and turned to walk into the portal.

Vora stopped her on the threshold. "I'll come with you."

"No need." Haylwen gripped the Scepter of Kings firmly. "I'll just go in, grab the squad, come right back. While I'm gone, help Cadarn and Nacia organize the attack plan." She stepped through the portal.

She stepped out next to a non-descript building with dark gray clouds hovering

above, threatening rain. A ringing bell in the distance, followed shortly by the sounds of yelling children, reminded her the facility hid near a large middle school. Good old Chuck knew how to pick locations. Haylwen stepped inside the entryway of the building. The large glass doors slid shut behind her as a school bus rumbled by, its sound almost eliminated by the doors. No expense spared.

The mirrored glass doors reflected a serious-looking young woman Haylwen barely recognized as herself. She turned and stepped up to the front desk, asking the receptionist to get the manager immediately. The twenty-something's eyes widened but never left Haylwen as she pressed a button and murmured urgently into her phone. A moment later, a middle-aged man with a face drawn in fatigue rushed up to the front desk from a back hallway. Surprisingly, Haylwen sensed he was a no-mu.

Haylwen held up the Scepter. "Peace and health to you. I'm only here to collect the Guardians."

The man nodded, looking her up and down, eyes wide. "I've only been here a few weeks. Still haven't gotten quite used to them."

Kay-two stepped out from a shadowed alcove. He snapped a fist to his stomach. "Em-two and En-two are in the hallways behind, Bee-two and Ef-one on internal patrol. We usually don't come up front, even with the mirrored glass."

Haylwen glanced at the manager standing next to Kay-two. He looked calm, but Haylwen felt the unease pouring off him. A no-mu. Haylwen looked up at the giant. "As much as you and your squad are valued here, we'll need you to come with me."

Kay-two raised an eyebrow but didn't ask any questions. He raised a hand to his throat mic.

The manager suddenly gasped and ran toward the glass doors, pressing his face against them to peer out.

Haylwen and Kay-two stepped next to him to peer out. Down the street, Haylwen could just see the back end of an enormous red-gold dragon, her tail lying in the street, her wings blocking the entire road.

The manager whipped around and grabbed Haylwen's arm. "It's a real live dragon. It looks distracted by something. Everyone just lay low and maybe it will go away."

Haylwen looked pointedly at the man's hand on her arm, and he yanked it back.

Even through the thick glass, the sound of rending metal pierced through the thick glass. The manager nodded. "Yep, definitely distracted."

Haylwen and Kay-two shared a look. Haylwen stabbed a finger at the manager. "Call or run back and tell the other Guardians to back us up."

Kay-two flung apart the glass doors and sprinted away, a blur down the street toward the dragon. The manager gawked after him.

Haylwen threw a tiny bolt of electricity at the manager, not enough to damage, just enough to get his attention. "Don't look at him, get going. Now."

The manager yelped, but then shook himself and headed toward the back at a run.

Haylwen turned and ran after Kay-two, screams of children urging her to hurry.

## CHAPTER 2

### PIECE-MAKER

**After watching Haylwen disappear** in the portal, Cadarn turned to look at the crowd of magic-using humans, only slightly smaller than it had been in the throne room. Most had formed a group around Dr. Bitten, still struggling in the magimetal ring. The group around them argued back and forth, one side of the circle against the other, with two parts between them looking on.

Cadarn tried to settle his suddenly twisting stomach. He straightened and looked Nacia in the eye. "Here I go."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To make peace with my enemies," he replied tightly. "That dragon was the same one who ate Chuck. And she brought all her friends this time. If we're going to take back the Castle, we'll need all the help we can get."

"I thought Haylwen would talk to them," Nacia said. "You're not the king, and –"

"No." He gritted his teeth to keep from yelling. "I'm not the king." Nacia raised her hands and opened her mouth, but Cadarn cut her off again. He didn't want to hear her perfectly good reasons for not talking to Dr. Bitten and the Conclave. "Haylwen just ran off to who-knows-where. Am I supposed to just sit around and wait to become lunch? I'm not the king, but I'm not incompetent."

"I don't doubt your ability," Nacia snapped and put her hands on her hips. "I only wonder if–"

"Good," Cadarn retorted. Nacia wasn't the only one who could have a temper. "Since my abilities are passable to you, let me handle this." He walked off, already kicking himself. He loved Nacia, and she was only trying to help him. But he'd been without sleep and stressed out for so long, he felt like a computer with too many programs running and not enough RAM. Everything kept crashing, including his mood. But he had to do something, he had to help Haylwen somehow. No time to shut down yet.

As he reached the large crowd around Dr. Bitten, the shouting voices washed over him, dulling his anger slightly. Split into two groups, the crowd moved and sent out waves of magic like a sea in a storm.

"Let him go immediately," Mr. Gunn commanded. A gray-haired Conclave member Cadarn knew well, he stood in front of the group of Conclave men on one side of Dr. Bitten, all the richest and most powerful of the nobles. To a man, they scowled.

At the front of the group on the other side, an older female magic user raised one finger. "He must provide a full disclosure about Chuck, their involvement with the

dragons, and their lies to us before he can disappear again." Cadarn recognized Ellen Wichenstein, the internationally renowned women's rights speaker. Her pronouncement brought rumbles of agreement from the small crowd of women on her left.

On her right, a group of younger people stood behind another magic user Cadarn had met, Sam Works, a reclusive software guru. He nodded to Ellen in agreement. "We need a full accounting of the truth." The group following him shifted forward.

Cadarn patted his belt, but the Scepter of Kings didn't hang there anymore. He scowled and tapped his pocket. He still had his wish wand, more than enough for any of these magic users. Taking a deep breath and trying to clear the dryness in his mouth, he approached the crowd from between the two opposing sides. A reasonable gap gave him a clear view of Dr. Bitten in his magimetal trap. Cadarn walked through the gap to stand within arm's reach of Dr. Bitten. Looking over the crowd, he uncrossed his arms and held them out, one to each opposing side. "Please, people, listen to me for a minute."

Both sides quieted immediately, turning to fix their eyes Cadarn. The hair on his arms wriggled with the magic rustling among the people in the crowd. Any second now, any number of duels or an outright free-for-all could breakout.

Cadarn started, "As the Right Hand of the king—"

"She's not my king." Dr. Bitten spat on the ground, his face twisted.

"Your king was eaten by a dragon," Cadarn threw back. "Right after trying to sell me to her. You're in no position to comment on anything." He pulled himself together, then turned back to look over the crowd. "Haylwen won the Scepter by Challenge and was ratified. She has the Crown. You all saw it."

The software guru held up his hands. "Maybe this is just semantics. Why don't we start by calling her 'Queen'?"

"Our laws specifically say no more Queens." Mr. Gunn sneered and looked down his nose. "If you had grown up..." A Conclave member tugged on him and whispered in his ear. A moment later, Mr. Gunn cleared his throat. "I suppose the Conclave could discuss it, if resources could still be allocated in the same structure, and appropriate restrictions placed on her authority."

"Must have been some kind of trick," someone muttered from the Conclave side. "No way a girl could harness that kind of power."

This wasn't working. Cadarn turned to walk away, but Nacia had come up behind him. She gave him a questioning glance. He tipped his head and gestured toward the crowd.

With a surge that sent tingles down Cadarn's arms, Nacia pulled energy through her wish wand, raised her hands, and a pillar of Fire leaped from one hand, spiraling up to light up the sky. From the other hand, a bolt of Earth energy shot into the ground

under Dr. Bitten's dangling feet, drilling a gaping hole under him. She smiled wolfishly. "I'm the Left Hand of the king. I'm not here to show you how much power I can harness, though it'd be fun to kick your butts. I'm here to see who has the guts to help remove the dragons from the Castle. Whether you recognize Haylwen as king or not, the dragons have to go."

Silence and furtive looks greeted her on both sides of the circle.

"I have a plenitude of courage," a young man called out from the group next to Sam Works. "But stupidity, I lack. Why ever should we risk ourselves to take the Castle?"

Cadarn couldn't place his face or slight accent. With his pale skin, made even paler by deep black hair, he looked like a vampire.

"To risk our lives for a thing as silly as a building, one many of us have never seen, smacks of self-servitude." The pale young man looked around, inviting comment. The Conclave members frowned but didn't disagree, only whispered among themselves.

"The dragons taking over everything needs to be stopped." Cadarn tried to keep his voice calm. "The Castle is a central hub and the base for all magic user knowledge and defense."

A roar, crash, and vibration in the ground from across the glade caught everyone's attention, and the whole group spun to look. Zed-one and Taraweta stood nose to nose, glaring at each other. Taraweta stomped one huge hippo-like foot, magic rippling from it, and another crash and rumble shook the ground. Vora stood behind them looking confused, swiveling from one to the other.

"Nacia, please try to talk some sense into these people. I'll be back." Cadarn rushed across the glade.

Staring up at the three giants, Cadarn felt like a first-grader interrupting a parent-teacher argument. He stood for a moment, waiting for them to notice him, but they didn't stop their growling. His eyebrows dropped, and he stood as straight as he could. "Hey!" The three giants' eyes flipped to him, and he crossed his arms. "We need to take back the Castle, we can't waste time arguing. What's the problem?"

Taraweta took a step back and rested one fist against her hippo-sized hip. "You say we must, and I know you. You believe this. After what your sister has done, what you two have shown yourself to be, I would follow you."

Cadarn relaxed and almost smiled. He wouldn't need the magic users. With an army of Hidden and Guardians behind him, the dragons wouldn't stand a chance. "So rouse the troops, and let's go!"

Taraweta twisted her hippo face, showing her tusk-like teeth. "My people are still rebuilding. For good reason, they do not trust industry or humans. After discussion with my war council, we determined we will fight—on one condition." She bared her hippo teeth. "We will not go with the Guardians."

"But if you don't go with me, you'll be slaughtered," Zed-one rumbled back.

Cadarn's smile fell, and his stomach dropped with it. "What's the problem?"

Zed-one and Taraweta just glared at each other as Vora sighed and explained. "Zed-one modified the silver suits' weapons, and any other weapons he scrounged up." Vora gestured from her son to Taraweta. "The Hidden won't have anything to do with technology or industry and want to only use magic and traditional weapons."

Cadarn tried to think of a response. Nothing really came. He needed both groups on board. "Taraweta has a point. We'll definitely need magic. But Zed-one's right, too. Traditional weapons won't do much, and we need any advantage we can take. You two will have to compromise."

"Compromise?" Taraweta whipped her head to turn her glare on Cadarn. "You heard what modern chemicals did to my people. We cannot compromise on that point."

"Guardians can't use magic." Zed-one rose to his full considerable height and crossed his arms on his enormous chest. "There's no way I'm letting a single one of my squad into a fight without reasonable weaponry. Besides, I didn't see magic helping back there."

Taraweta put her hands on her hips and swung her head back to scowl at Zed-one. "Poisoning and killing everything on the earth to save it makes no sense."

"Without the right tools, you can't save anything," Zed-one shot back.

Cadarn tried not to let his face show the disappointment or fear twisting his insides even further. He knew without magic, a force trying to reclaim the Castle would fail quickly and painfully to the dragons. Without the Guardians' size and strength, magical powers wouldn't have a way to break through the dragon defenses. Without the Hidden, they would have to rely on human magic users and Guardians.

A glance back at the squabbling humans showed them still trading arguments with Nacia, and now with Faustas and Cadarn's parents. Cadarn's twisting insides wrapped around his throat. How could he possibly convince them the Castle needed saving? He certainly didn't have a logical argument or data to back up his hunch. Just some clues from the way Haylwen and Faustas talked, and he'd read about the Castle and found hints in books suggesting it was more than just a building. His intuition told him they needed to take back the Castle, and quickly. But how? The Hidden didn't trust tech or humans, and the human magic users seemed content to argue the time away.

He turned and trudged back to Nacia, his mind spinning around but producing no ideas. Maybe he'd been wrong about not being incompetent.

## CHAPTER 3

### HELPING

**Haylwen turned the corner** and skidded to a stop. Hovering in the street as big as a train, the dragon stood over the yellow-orange school bus. The red-gold scaled monster had peeled the top off the bus like a pull-tab can of cat food. Her left front claw lingered over the bus full of children cringing against the walls. A slash across the dragon's left shoulder lined up with Kay-two's leveled weapon.

"Step away from the human children." Kay-two's voice rang hard and sharp, like a weapon itself.

The dragon shifted, putting her left front claw on the ground as the slash on her shoulder healed itself. "Where did you come from? Oh, look, and you brought a little friend, too." The dragon turned to face them a bit more, and Kay-two shifted his weapon to cover. "I don't think you're ready to take on a dragon. Just leave me with my little candy tin here, and I'll forget this ever happened."

Haylwen growled under her breath and threw a barrage of bolts at the dragon, narrowly missing the dragon's head.

Narrowing her sharp eye ridges, the dragon peered down. "Oh, it's you. The little human king. I've heard about you."

Haylwen put a bubble around herself and looked at Kay-two. The bubble would hinder the Guardian's movements and weapon. She hoped his natural resistance to magic would protect him. Where was that backup she'd called for, anyway?

The dragon took a slow step away from the bus. "I'm happy to leave. There's more where these came from."

She ducked her head and spread her wings, and Haylwen wondered if she should fire at the dragon as she flew away.

Instead of taking off, the dragon shot a burst of fire in a wave. Kay-two flipped up and away before the fire blinded Haylwen. As she strengthened her shield, the dragon flicked her tail and the world tumbled, Haylwen flying around in her bubble, bashing her head, elbows, and knees. She crashed into the lampposts on the side of the road but managed to hold onto her bubble as the world wavered around her.

Haylwen struggled to her feet, ready to blast back. Kay-two, a blurring form leaping wildly with bolts of energy flying out, bounced near the dragon as she slashed with her claws and spat fire toward the spinning Guardian. Kay-two's shots scored minor hits that didn't seem to slow the dragon down. Many went wild, the dragon's reactions so quick and fluid, it seemed like some went right through her. Haylwen tried shooting a few exploding fireballs, but the dance between the dragon and Kay-two

flowed so fast and erratic she didn't know which one she'd hit.

Another blast of flame caught Kay-two, knocking him out of a spin. A quick tail flick, and the Guardian rocketed backward into the ground next to the sidewalk, plowing a trench in his path.

Haylwen threw a small dome of a bubble around Kay-two as she ran over. He climbed to his feet, still smoking, and looked at the smoldering mess in his hand that used to be a weapon. "I was out, anyway." He looked at Haylwen, eyes fierce. "We have to rescue those defenseless children at any price."

Haylwen focused on the *defenseless* part. The kids on that bus looked about her and Kay-two's age. Both of their childhoods were motivation enough to want to protect those kids, but looking at Kay-two's crumbled weapon, she knew they'd need something more than determination to defeat this beast.

"I'll make you invisible right up until you engage the dragon," she said. "You take the rear half, and I'll take the front. We just need to slow her down until the rest of your squad comes."

Kay-two saluted and turned, ready to sprint away. Haylwen flipped his bubble inside out, making him invisible, then struggled for a moment to attach it to the Guardian. "Annoying magic resistance," she muttered to herself. "Can't you tell I'm trying to help?" Finally finishing the task, she said, "Count to three, then go." She shot Earth energy to form pillars of stone at the dragon, trying to hem her in and away from the bus, while Kay-two tore off in a sparkling streak toward the dragon.

A bit of a wall in place now to protect the bus, Haylwen focused her attack on the dragon's chest and neck, mixing fireballs and whirling metal blades. Kay-two hit the dragon around the middle, diving with his horn, scoring a line down the dragon's scales and knocking her hindquarters sideways into a wall of stone. Haylwen's next two blades scored hits and sent blood pouring down the dragon's left shoulder and neck. She roared and blew fire in a swath toward Haylwen, melting lampposts and pavement. Haylwen's shots flew erratically in the firestorm, and she braced herself for the backlash.

Kay-two yelled as the dragon kicked with a back leg, ripping through his bubble and tearing a chunk from his shoulder. The Guardian regained his footing and flung himself at the dragon headfirst, plunging his horn into her chest. The dragon screamed, clawing at herself to dislodge him. Her claw ripped into his already injured arm, pulling him loose and flinging him toward her snapping jaws. He threw himself down, avoiding tooth and claw, rolling under the base of her neck. He leaped, plunging his horn into her shoulder.

The dragon, leaping and twisting, poured flames down her body and onto Kay-two. Haylwen shot bolts whenever she dared. The dragon writhed and shook Kay-two loose. He fell heavily, followed by a stream of bright blue dragon blood. Kay-two crouched for a moment, still smoking, then sprang back up at the dragon, his horn

plunging into her shoulder. The dragon screamed, flapping her wings as she sent another wave of flames over both of them. She twisted and clawed at him with a rear leg like a dog scratching a tick, scraping him off. The Guardian fell to the ground in a heap, crawled a short distance away, and then collapsed.

The dragon took a step back, wounds slowly healing, as four more Guardians finally arrived in a cloud of dust, screeching to a halt near Haylwen.

"Apologies. We couldn't find our weapons, the manager had hidden them." Em-two stepped forward, a scowl on his face. "What's our attack pattern?"

No weapons? Haylwen's guts clenched, but she didn't have a choice. She had to stop the dragon now. "Attack at will. Focus on the front."

The four Guardians leaped at the dragon simultaneously. The dragon dodged and responded with another flame blast. The Guardians kept their charge through the flames, bursting out in a diamond formation. The dragon snapped forward and caught one in her jaws, shaking him before flinging his limp body to the side. Another landed a blow, sinking a horn in her left shoulder before her claws scraped him off, carving bleeding furrows down his back. The last two dove headfirst, carving gouges in her left back and side with their horns. The dragon screamed. She twisted and caught them both with a fireball as they tried to regroup, sending them tumbling down the street like burning paper rags.

Anger flared Haylwen's Ring of Fire, and she shot at the dragon, a barrage of metal blades, fireballs, and electric bolts that sent scales flying. A few bolts hit an already scaleless spot, plunging into the dragon's chest and legs.

Dripping blue blood, the dragon leaped up, flapping her wings but wavering erratically, her left wing out of sync. She roared, shimmered, and vanished entirely.

Haylwen rushed forward to Kay-two and the other downed Guardians, praying they would live. She reached the first two Guardians, Bee-two and Ef-one, lying still in pools of blood. Haylwen couldn't sense the barest spark of energy from them, and so she ran on.

Struggling to ignore the two dead Guardians, she stopped at Kay-two. Burns covered his body, and he lay motionless, but she sensed he still lived. She bent over Kay-two and, with a shaking finger, pulled back one closed eyelid. He moaned weakly. Easily passing his resistance to magic, she poured healing energy in and felt his wounds absorb it and start healing. Without waiting, she stepped to the next Guardian, Em-two, and poured healing energy into him the same way. He responded quickly, and she jumped to the last.

En-two held onto life by a thread. Haylwen closed her eyes and, ever so gently, trickled healing energy in. But the magic dripped away, finding nothing to heal. Tired and in tremendous pain, his will to live and his life energy avoided the magic.

Gently as a lullaby, Haylwen spoke into his thoughts. *"You have done great deeds, noble Guardian. But the world needs you yet. Do not give up hope. Your friends and family wait*

*for you. People needing your protection wait for you. Please follow me."*

A moment passed. A barest sense of willingness reached out, and Haylwen fed that new blossoming hope a steady stream of healing energy. Once convinced he'd received enough, Haylwen opened her eyes.

In front of her, the bus driver stood gaping, holding back a crowd of teary-eyed children. The two Guardians Haylwen had just healed struggled to their feet. Once they were standing, the children started clapping and cheering. Haylwen dragged herself back to check on Kay-two, still lying down. As she reached him, a soft noise next to Haylwen spun her back, hand poised to fire bolts.

A girl about her own age stood staring at her, eyes as big as a cartoon's. "I so thought we were going to die. He—whatever he is," she pointed at Kay-two, "totally saved us."

Kay-two opened his eyes and sat up. "Did the dragon leave? Are the children okay?"

The girl ran forward and threw her arms around his neck in a hug. The other children and the bus driver burst into another round of cheers. The Guardians all grinned ear to ear.

The girl let Kay-two go, and he stood. The bus driver whispered, "Who are you?"

Haylwen turned to face him, hearing the Guardians fall in behind her. "We're your friends. These are Guardians, noble warriors, here to protect you. Excuse us for a moment, and then we'll get you home."

She turned and pulled the Guardians into a soundproof bubble. "I came to bring you on a dangerous but important mission. But it appears everywhere is a dangerous and important mission. You're needed here, I'll find another way." Standing tall, she tried to look like she already had a plan. "Escort these kids home, and then set up a defensive perimeter. I'll arrange for weapons and better support, as I'm sure the dragons will be back."

Kay-two glanced at the other two Guardians. They looked at each other and nodded. "If you're going to the Castle, I should come," Kay-two said. "Em-two and En-two can manage until the others arrive."

The twin Guardians snapped their fists to their chests. "Consider it done."

"Thank you, Em-two and En-two. We will not forget you."

The twins turned and headed to the small crowd of children, who surged past the bus driver in a babble of excitement.

Haylwen bit her lip and used the commotion to quietly open portals under the two dead Guardians, sending their bodies to the Dragonway. Then she opened a portal and gestured Kay-two through it. "Kay-two, I invite you into the Dragonway for as long as you serve the Crown." Pausing as Kay-two disappeared into the black, Haylwen looked back over at the children. Not one of them was a magic user. But as the Guardians sank to one knee, children swarmed them, touching their rhino horns,

petting their long rabbit ears, and hugging the giants, all while chattering about the dragon attack.

She hadn't found the reinforcements she'd come for; instead, she'd found a new world to fight for. She strode through the portal behind Kay-two.

## CHAPTER 4

### MEETING MINDS

**The sounds of excited children** echoing in her mind, Haylwen stepped out of the portal to stand next to Kay-two, tingles running over her. A few paces away, Rivenwake stood next to Daerren. Haylwen's gaze lingered on Rivenwake before being pulled away. Across the glade, the crowd of magic-users still argued. She sensed Cadarn but couldn't pick him out of the crowd. One gray-haired man saw her and pointed. Most of the crowd turned, and she felt a wave of disapproval crash into her.

She straightened her posture and adjusted her grip on the Scepter. She'd watched her father and Chuck enough to know that love-struck wasn't how kings looked. Putting on her most kingly face, she said, "Kay-two, please report to Zed-one." Then she headed toward Daerren and Rivenwake, already walking to meet her.

Daerren was limping, but his face showed solidity, while Rivenwake showed a troubled look like a bleeding wound. *Both dragons.* She struggled to get her mind around that. As she approached them, her mask of kingliness grew slippery. She still somewhat saw Daerren as she'd first known him, as Mr. Vestas, her kindly ceramics teacher, big and comfortable, like her old overstuffed couch. He had been the only teacher she could remember in school treating her with kindness and compassion. He'd looked at her as if he knew who she was, and accepted her at that.

That impression now mixed with the impossible knowledge that he'd gifted her a powerful magic item *and* was a dragon the size of the city bus. In his form of an older man, he looked more like a teddy bear than a reptile, with a grizzled beard and chunky body. She stopped a pace away from him so she didn't have to crane her neck; she barely came to the middle of his chest.

He smiled down at her. "Hello again, king." He made the title sound like a nickname.

She smiled back, losing a layer of discomfort. "Hello, Mr. Vestas—I mean, Daerren."

His soft brown eyes darkened slightly and swirled, becoming fathomless. "While we've met, the Forms require a proper introduction now. I am the leader of the clan of Earth dragons and head of all dragon clans." He tucked his head, then held out a hand the size of a baseball mitt.

"Nice to meet you." Haylwen reached out her own hand and shook his, the weight of being king dropping on her again. When she touched his hand, she got a sense of his dragonness and magical power—so large and massive, like nothing she'd ever sensed before, she felt as if she stood next to a mountain of energy—and with them

came a hint that everything would work out.

"I had a sense it would be you." The twinkle in his eye made the words sound fatherly.

Faustas ran up, his face glowing. "Crystyn and Abrennan are going to talk to the nobles. I suppose centuries of kings like Chuck would make a magic user lily-livered. Not that it matters." He beamed at Daerren. "As long as you're leading us, we shall easily throw Solbright out." He turned back to Haylwen. "But I'll need to tell you the secret of kings and try to figure out what stopped your connection to the Castle before we go back."

"Wait." Daerren held up a hand, his voice grave. "You must know why Rivenwake and I need your help. It seems that Solbright isn't what she was before." He fixed his eyes on Faustas. "She shot a bolt that injured me. An injury that won't heal."

Faustas tilted his head and looked at Daerren, his forehead wrinkling. "She injured you?"

Daerren nodded solemnly, putting a hand on his leg. A dark drop of wetness marred his pants. "Not only does she have dragons of all clans fighting for her, but she's also learned new methods. Despite failing at first, Rivenwake is sure that with the king's help leading the Castle, he could heal me."

Faustas gaped even further. "It won't heal by itself, and Rivenwake couldn't heal you?"

Daerren nodded.

Faustas shook himself. "Yet another reason to go in and kick that fly out."

Haylwen looked back and forth, completely lost.

"While I agree we will have to confront Solbright at some point," Daerren said, "and that with the Castle at stake, sooner is better, I am not sure now is best."

"There is but now," Faustas replied firmly. "Let us only delay long enough for me to tell Haylwen the secret of kings." He fixed his eyes on Haylwen and gestured toward the trees. They set off at a brisk walk, heading into the forest, and Haylwen called out mentally to Cadarn that she'd be right back.

Faustas led them a good ways into the trees, and then seemingly at random, he sat next to one. Haylwen stopped and glanced over her shoulder at Daerren, who disappeared into the shadows.

"He shall join us in his own way," Faustas said. He looked up at Haylwen calmly.

Haylwen's Ring of Fire burned. She'd had about as much as she could take. "Where is Daerren going? What're you doing sitting down here? What in the hell is going on?"

Faustas looked up at her, surprised. He jumped up and with a serious face, bowed to Haylwen. "Apologies, my king." He murmured and flicked a finger, throwing a bubble around the two of them. The background noise of the forest disappeared.

Despite the soundproof bubble, Faustas dropped his voice low. "As was told to

me, I tell you now. Dragons who live among us are powerful beyond compare, but have a weakness. To uphold the peace, we are sworn to protect the secret of their weakness and only pass it from king to king or risk breaking the truce between humans and dragons." He paused, looking away for a moment.

Haylwen's breath caught. The dragons had a weakness? She wanted to hug Faustas for giving her a real hope. Right after she strangled him for keeping it from her for so long.

Faustas muttered, "Truth be told, I think Solbright already broke the truce, but I'm not the king. In any case," he looked back and resumed his formal manner, "because of the vital importance of this knowledge, I must take you to a place of complete confidence. Will you follow me?"

Haylwen looked into his eyes, felt his utter seriousness. A tingle rippled over her as she heard his words echoing through the past, through generations upon generations before her. She took a steady breath before answering, "I will."

A hint of Faustas's mischievousness flickered across his face. He gestured to the grass next to him as he sat back down. "Please sit. We go somewhere that is both real and not real, a place of great magic. Questions you might have from what you see there, I will answer, but only afterward. While there, I shall tell you the secret of kings. Please sit and open your mind to me."

Impatient, Haylwen sat facing him and guessed what Faustas might be talking about. "Going inside the tree-mind, right?"

Faustas blinked rapidly, eyebrows furrowing momentarily. "Tree-mind? I've always called it Beyond the Wall of Green. Most don't call it anything at all. Talk to trees, and people think you're mad."

"Either way, I don't need you to show me how to get into the tree-mind."

"Of course not," Faustas said dryly. "Shall we?"

Haylwen closed her eyes and felt for the familiar sense of energy beyond herself, a river to relax and let herself float toward. She slid down the winding river, landing with a thump, her eyes popping open. She stood on a small island, surrounded by a stream. Other islands spread out around her, with swift streams making their way along them, a network of water and earth. Each island had a single tree on it, moss and grass a green carpet from the tree to the water.

Next to her stood Faustas, grinning ear to ear. "You *have* been here before. You and I might be the only ones who didn't find their way here after being dragged, kicking and screaming."

Haylwen eyed the next island over. Out of place compared to the rest, it held a mountain of rocky plates surrounding the island's single tree. A lump on the mountain moved, becoming a dragon's head. Haylwen started, then chided herself when she saw Daerren's soft brown eyes smiling in the stone. She kept forgetting just how big he was. Now she knew why he'd left before.

The tree disappeared, replaced by an old man wearing a long robe of coarse fabric shaded in browns. Haylwen grinned at Barandarus and held herself back from running to give her old friend a hug. Not terribly kingly, jumping into hugs.

In a clattering of stony scales, Daerren shrank, changing to human form. He faced Barandarus and bowed. "Thanks to you, Barandarus."

The old man clapped his hands like a child on Christmas and hopped in place. "Now is was the time of you three."

Haylwen struggled to keep a straight face. He'd helped her so much with the pricklescrinch, teaching her about the tree-mind and the nature of magic. She loved the old tree, but he spoke so oddly.

Faustas nodded. "We are here to tell Haylwen the secret of kings."

"Of course, of course." Barandarus smiled with his whole face, his bright green eyes surrounded by brown wrinkles.

Faustas's eyes locked on Haylwen's, hard as dragon scales. "Listen closely, king. With a dragon as witness, I speak only truth, to be never forgotten. When it is time, tell this secret to the next king—the next *ratified* king—only. This secret must be shared only once before your grave."

A shiver ran down Haylwen's spine.

Faustas flicked his fingers, and images appeared like a holographic movie to match his words. "Long ago, during a great war between humans and dragons, humans learned the dragons' weakness. Three kinds of dragons exist, which they call *clans*. Earth dragons, who are male, Water dragons, who are male, and Fire dragons, who are female. Brown-black Earth dragons burrow through stone, silver-scaled Water dragons fly under the sea, and red-gold Fire dragons soar in the sky. This much, you know." His voice dropped low. "Invulnerable to two of the three magical energies, each clan is powerless to the magic wielded by the third. Fire dragons, who only use Fire energy, will not be hurt by Fire or Water magic, but even non-magical Earth can harm her. So, too, Water will burn in Fire, and Earth will wash away in Water. Among dragons, there is balance."

Haylwen tried to process the constant stream of images. A red-gold dragon shrugging off blasts of fire, gouts of water, then falling as a stone spear easily sunk into her chest. Past fights with dragons started making sense. A question popped out. "Why?"

Faustas blushed and stammered.

Daerren answered for him. "It is necessary for our reproduction."

Haylwen felt her face heat. Then she noticed the bright blue blood on Daerren's right leg. She blinked, and the spot vanished but slowly grew back. "Wait a second. Earth dragons can only be harmed by Water energy? Solbright's a Fire dragon, and I thought you said she can't use Water energy, but she harmed you. I'm confused."

"As are we," Daerren rumbled.

"A fluke," Faustas snapped. "It doesn't matter anyway. We have to kick her out of the Castle, whatever it takes. We have to do it soon. She's there for a reason. And Daerren needs the Castle to be healed."

"My injury should not put anyone else at risk—" Daerren started.

"Stubborn as a rock," Faustas cut in. "Even though you are thickheaded, I know you have not forgotten that regardless of needing you healthy, we still need the Castle. We must oust Solbright, and the only being she is even slightly afraid of is *you*." Faustas glared at Daerren.

Haylwen tried again. "Why the Castle? Why me? Isn't this a dragon thing?"

Faustas spun back to Haylwen. "I cannot teach you the full history now, we have no time. Think! Humans can use all three energies. To control the world, Solbright must control or kill us." He pulled on his mustache. "The second human-dragon war almost broke the world. Dragons and humans established a truce, one stipulation of which was to grant control of the Castle—with all of her weapons and power—to humans. In return, humans would not use or speak of the secret of kings except as we do now, and to reveal it only if the truce were broken. Dragons went into hiding." He shook his head. "We couldn't understand the terms. What did we know of waiting for centuries? Humans' short lifespans and lack of written language made corruption and loss of the information a foregone conclusion. Only a few remnants lingered on, their true meaning forgotten, like the hand game, Frog Centipede Snake."

Haylwen shook her head. Hand game? "Like Rock Paper Scissors? What does that have to do with dragons?"

Faustas snorted. "Can you not see? Water covers Earth, Earth breaks Fire, Fire cuts Water. The secret of kings, lost in a simple pastime." He pointed at Haylwen. "But now the secret can be revealed. Solbright sent dragons out to attack. Any would say such an act clearly breaks the truce. She's trying to steal control of the Castle, by all that's holy! Without her power, humanity is doomed. As king, Haylwen, you could decide that the secret of kings need no longer be secret." He looked at Daerren's bleeding leg. "But even with the secret known, we will still need Daerren to take back the Castle."

Haylwen's heart lurched as she put things together. "That's why you need Rivenwake inside the Castle. To heal Daerren."

Faustas nodded gravely. "He tried by himself, and failed. He thinks he could do it, but only with the Castle's help."

"Does he have to go?" Haylwen's stomach twisted. "Solbright could kill Rivenwake, and he couldn't hurt her at all."

Daerren murmured, "Evasion and flight are the only weapons of Water to Fire."

"As he proved on me," Faustas said, smoothing his mustache, "Rivenwake is the best. Daerren's wound is like nothing seen before. We need Daerren, and his wound needs Rivenwake. We must act now."

Daerren fixed a baleful look on Faustas, then sighed and nodded. "The prophecy of the One unfolds."

Haylwen started to ask what that meant when Faustas interrupted. "Rivenwake shall be in little danger. Haylwen, your troops will distract Solbright and the dragons. After Rivenwake heals Daerren, he can leave. With Daerren, the true king of the magic-users and an army at his—I mean her—back," he said, bowing to Haylwen, "we can reclaim the Castle easily. Then we can set things in motion to save the world."

"Save, remade, a golden age," Daerren barely murmured. But his words, "a golden age, golden age," amplified and echoed among islands as the trees flashed briefly into human form to chant to each other before changing back.

Responsibility pressed on Haylwen's chest. "What if Rivenwake and Daerren stay out of it?"

"Solbright is too strong," Faustas shot back. "Without Daerren, an attack would be certain death. The prophecy says *a golden age*, but it doesn't tell whose. Can you imagine Solbright's golden age?" He waived his hand. "She's a megalomaniac and severely unstable, but terribly smart. She must be stopped."

Daerren nodded. "Agreed. She has a huge dragon following. Only the Castle's power could give humans a fighting chance at stopping her plans."

Faustas stared at Haylwen. "We must do whatever it takes to get the Castle back."

## CHAPTER 5

### TRUCELESS

**Haylwen opened her eyes** and stood as Faustas jumped up and walked back toward the glade. She threw a look over her shoulder as she followed him.

"Daerren will catch up." Faustas waved her on. "He has other things to take care of right now. We will meet him before we attack the Castle."

A cry for help shouted Haylwen's mind. *Oakren?* Ignoring Faustas's question, she ran to the side of the glade with the group of magic users. She slowed when she saw Cadarn, but he pointed into the forest. She continued a short way in before finding Oakren and Doakren, facing three magic users. Running to the twins' side, she saw they stood directly in front of a vine snaking up a tree with flowers as large as bed pillows.

She turned to face the three magic users, as Dr. Bitten's familiar voice yelled something she didn't catch.

One of the three magic users twitched at Dr. Bitten's yell and pointed at the twins. "If you catch a fairy, you get a wish," he said, "and we need a wish to get Dr. Bitten out. Now get of the way."

Two of the flowers on the vine quivered.

Haylwen had never heard of such a myth but guessed it was no stranger than catching a leprechaun to get a pot of gold. With a flick of her wrist, she slid a touch of Earth energy to the magic users facing the twins. The ground grabbed the mus' feet up to their shins, sliding all three out of the forest, leaving furrows in the dirt as they plowed backward, arms windmilling. Haylwen paused, looking over her shoulder. The flowers on the vine shivered again, and she saw tiny faces peep out at her from inside the flowers. She waved at them, then turned and stomped out of the forest following the three magic users.

"What childishness is this?" Haylwen shouted, stopping to stand next to Cadarn with her hands on her hips. She glared pointedly at the three magic users who'd slunk next to a group of older magic users. "I'm declaring it treason to interfere with any fairy or to harm any plant or animal in the Dragonway. The punishment for treason is death." She pointed over to the twins just emerging from the forest. "I'm appointing Oakren and Doakren as special protectors to this Dragonway, granted with the authority to enforce this law with whatever means they deem necessary." She shook her head. "If we can't settle small issues among ourselves, how can we tackle a problem the size of a dragon?" Looking at Cadarn, she gestured to Dr. Bitten. "Please release Dr. Bitten."

Cadarn opened his mouth, then shut it and touched her mind. "*Are you sure you want to do that? Can we trust him?*"

She snapped back, *"Who's the king?"* She shut her eyes for a moment, trying to calm her anger. *"I can't trust him, but he's the least of our worries, and I don't have time to guard him and all his crazy followers."*

Cadarn flicked his fingers, and the magimetal vanished. Dr. Bitten pulled himself together with a huff. Before he could say anything, Haylwen fixed him with a look. "Don't think I'm finished questioning you. I can always find you."

He stood tall and rolled his eyes. Haylwen took a breath, one hand clenching into a fist, and Dr. Bitten turned and quickly walked to stand next to Mr. Gunn and other old white men, all frowning. Blowing her breath out, Haylwen noticed the humans had formed two separate groups on either side of where Dr. Bitten had been trapped. Gathering energy, she walked forward a few paces so she could look at both groups at the same time.

Cadarn walked next to her and murmured, "Mom and Dad worked on them. They'll listen."

Haylwen stepped forward, hands raised, and felt energy tingling all around and through her. "The Castle is much more than it seems and has power over the dragons who would enslave us again. Believe me, for our sakes, for the world, to establish the balance of energy and power, we must have the Castle, or the dragons will lord over us and we will be nothing but slaves."

She swept her arm around, gesturing to the small group of Guardians standing in the middle of the glade. "We do not go alone, but with our powerful friends and allies. We are a force to be reckoned with. Nor are all dragons our enemies; we go into this battle with dragons at our side. We can fight and win. We *must* fight and win. And so we will. Who's with me?"

A ragged show of hands and a few cheers greeted her at first, growing louder as more joined in. Ripples of energy washed over her. If the magic users believed they could do it, they would.

A male voice cut through the cheers. "Let's not destroy our chance in haste." Mr. Gunn looked at Haylwen like he'd just swallowed a piece of meat too tough to chew. "We'll need to set up supplies and plans, a command post and fallback positions. I'll need two weeks at least, a month would be better, to arrange everything."

"We attack tomorrow." Haylwen blurted out the words without thinking. She didn't know why, but tomorrow felt right. "The longer we wait, the more time the invaders have to damage the Castle." Murmurs went around the crowd, and Haylwen chased them. "Tomorrow is enough time to rest, gather strength. Prepare what magical items you have, bring in any magic user who could possibly help. We can't afford to waste this opportunity. Tomorrow we strike, take back our Castle and our power. It's long past time to turn the tables and take the war to the dragons, to win once and for all."

A few around Dr. Bitten still looked disgruntled but didn't say anything else. The

other magic users cheered in response, and their energy swelled. Now Haylwen just had to organize the Guardians and magic users in one day. Not much time. She looked above the trees to see the sun hanging low in the sky.

And dragons flying right toward her.

Before she could even shout a warning, exploding fireballs hit the ground, tearing up turf and throwing people in all directions. Shrieks pierced the air, adding to the raucousness of exploding fireballs and roar of the flames. Magic users threw blue bubbles up, and portals popped open around the glade. Two red-gold dragons swooped in from above, as big as army helicopters. The sweeps of their wings fanned the flames, sending burning leaves and sticks swirling in a firestorm. They let loose another barrage of fire, and then both dove, claws extended, to crash into the small group of Guardians, swinging claws and tails, then leaping up with a Guardian in each claw as they flew away.

Two more dragons slipped in after them, diving again. Haylwen drew through her wish wand and Scepter of Kings to throw a blue protection bubble around the glade. The dragons roared and hit it with a wave of flames. Haylwen grunted under the blow. Another pair of dragons joined them, dropping to land on the bubble, tearing with teeth and talon. Pain erupted through Haylwen as if they clawed her mind.

She shot bolts up, unable to tell where anyone was in the chaos. A group of Guardians lay still as stones. Were Vora and Zed-one still alive? Before Haylwen could look, a dragon dove out of the sky in a glittering red-gold flash. Blasting flames, it slammed into her shield. Despite the power she pulled through her wish wand and the Scepter of Kings, Haylwen's bubble buckled and shattered, a hole opening as blue energy cracked and fell like broken glass.

*"Tell me,"* Faustas's voice rasped in her mind like a file on steel. *"Is now the time to revoke the secret of kings? Or do you not think this qualifies as breaking the truce?"*

She didn't answer but fired bolts of pure Earth energy like a spread of rockets. Faustas mirrored her. The bolts flew at the dragons and hit in their flanks, tearing through scales and wings. The dragons screamed, leaped up and away, rising incredibly fast. Bright blue blood fell down in a rain to splatter on the ground. The two dragons behind them twisted and changed course to follow.

They shot another barrage of bolts after the dragons, now too small to see.

Haylwen dropped her arms. They had driven the dragons off but paid a terrible price. Their band of Guardians lay scattered, a few huddled over some of the ones lying prone. Haylwen knew others had been carried off and would never return.

Beyond the Guardians, the large group of magic users had vanished, with only a few small trios left behind. Haylwen hoped most of them had made it through portals, but she saw scattered bodies lying around, some moaning and others in unnatural positions.

This was all her fault. Weeping, she cast around, looking for a way to make it

better, knowing she never could.

Near her, Faustas poured water around like a fireplug, so she left the fires to him. Letting her anger and guilt power a surge of magic, she sent healing energy in a great wave over the whole clearing. Searching with her mind, she saw Cadarn busily healing a young male magic user. She moved on, finding Vora injured but alive. She healed her friend, then a Guardian she didn't know and three humans Cadarn hadn't gotten to yet.

Many she reached too late. Tears streamed down her face for the Guardians and humans she couldn't heal. Her crying increased as she counted eight humans and five Guardians that died—because of *her*. The dragons had killed thirteen souls under her protection.

She finished healing and ran back toward Vora, finding her sitting up with Zed-one squatting nearby. They turned and faced her at the same time. Vora tipped her huge head in a bow. "Again you save my life."

Haylwen nodded, but her Ring of Fire burned, matching her gut's heartburn of rage. Guilt soured it, that she hadn't had the power or foresight to prevent the attack. She knew it wasn't logical but didn't try to fight it.

With a thought, she checked in with Cadarn and the magic users. Everyone who could be healed had been. Her brother's exhaustion and despair over the ones he couldn't save weighed on Haylwen like an anvil on her back. Six dead, five saved, and two with minds too damaged for Cadarn to heal. Maybe Rivenwake could do something, but neither of them had the skill.

"They know we can hurt them." Zed-one's voice cut into Haylwen's thoughts. His eyes blazed. "They target the Guardians. Swoop in, do as much damage as they can, then swoop out. I know we're trying to protect a lot of valuable people, but we don't have the numbers or ability to counter these kinds of attacks. They'll just destroy us piece by piece."

Haylwen felt another anvil fall on her. "We'll have to centralize. Maybe have no-mus move in and around the Castle."

"First we need to take the Castle, and we'll need all the help we can get to fight the dragons." Zed-one shook his head. "Magic users can barely hold their own, and there aren't enough to help."

Haylwen's head throbbed, and she forced her jaws to unclench. What would Zed-one say about the secret of kings? "Let me talk to the magic users." She stood up slowly, aching all over. She'd have to tell everyone how to kill dragons, and soon. The responsibility burned in her chest and numbed her tongue. To give humans a fighting chance, she'd have to tell them how easy it was to hurt Rivenwake. What would Dr. Bitten do?

She dragged herself over to where Cadarn and Faustas had gathered the remaining magic users. Haylwen groaned silently to see that Dr. Bitten was one of them. Could she really give him the secret of kings? From the blood on his shirt, but the

fact that he stood easily, her brother must have saved his life.

Cadarn wobbled, and Haylwen had to leap forward to catch him. "You okay?" Haylwen stared into her brother's eyes, but swirls of darkness and flashing met her.

"I'll be okay. Just a minute," Cadarn mumbled, before his eyes rolled back and he collapsed. Faustas rushed forward to help Haylwen lay him down.

She connected to the energy and poured healing and strength into her brother. She felt the shattered remnants of a link like a broken egg dropped on a sidewalk. She tracked the link and felt her face pinch. The egg was rotten—the link led through one person to Dr. Bitten. She wiped away the stinking filth, breaking the connection. Cadarn's connection to Faustas thrummed in stark contrast to the other.

"I shall help him." Faustas stared into Haylwen's eyes with a look that said he had more to say, but now wasn't the time. He touched her mind and must have sensed her feelings. *"Our dragon friends must take care of themselves. We shall not survive if you don't arm humans with the secret of kings."*

## CHAPTER 6

### COUNTER

**Haylwen** faced **Dr. Bitten** and the other magic users. "Do you see now why we need to attack the Castle and get rid of these dragons?"

"Because we have the strength to stand up to them?" Dr. Bitten barked a laugh. "No, our only choice is to run and hide. Re-group and gather weapons to attack, guerrilla-style. The silver suits are our only chance to get to a place of negotiating some sort of reasonable accommodation. If we hurt them long enough, they'll give in to our demands. Time will make us stronger."

"Waiting will cripple us," Haylwen shot back. "We have the strength *now*, a team with Guardians, Hidden, dragons—"

"Dragons." Dr. Bitten waved a hand. "Where were they when *these* dragons attacked? We've had nothing but pain and sorrow from dragons. And those monsters the dragons made? They'll betray us, just you watch. We humans can only trust other humans."

Haylwen glanced around the small group and saw all of the magic users either nodding or looking at the ground. Where were Daerren and Rivenwake? She struggled with the irony of Dr. Bitten accusing anyone of betrayal, and that telling him the secret of kings would be betraying two dragons she cared about.

The moment stretched. She had to say something. "Together, we're strong enough. Alone, running and hiding, with guerrilla attacks? That's no way to live. They'll hunt us down, one by one. If humans really are in this alone—not that I think we are, but just for argument's sake—taking the Castle back is our only route to win freedom for all people."

Dr. Bitten stabbed his finger at Haylwen. "That's your problem, right there. Lumping us all together. I'll bet you're even including worthless no-mus." His eyes grazed the few magic users around him. "Every man for himself, and the strong will survive. That's how it's always been, and our only option right now."

"Every man for himself?" Haylwen spit out. "Even one powerful man can only—"

"Can protect himself," Dr. Bitten interrupted, "and I'm a powerful man. We all are here. Oh, except *you*. We're leaving."

Haylwen's Ring of Fire burned, and she struggled to keep from strangling him. Let the dragons wipe him and those like him out, what did she care! But when Dr. Bitten opened a portal, guilt kicked in. She had to tell them. "Wait, please," she said.

With a dismissive wave, Dr. Bitten ignored her and stepped into the portal. The small group of magic users left after the attack filed out after him, avoiding her eyes.

Not one even slowed as she begged them to stay and listen. A moment later, the portal winked closed. Every magic user had gone, back to face more dragon attacks. Without even hearing the secret of kings.

Guilt kicking her with every heartbeat, Haylwen spun to face Faustas and Cadarn. "I tried." Her voice low and raspy, she tried to sound determined. "Even if it's just you, me, and Daerren, we have to get rid of Solbright, right?"

Faustas nodded, and Cadarn just looked grim.

Haylwen connected to the twins, finding them working to heal the damage to the forest. After asking them to join her, she led the others back to where Vora, Zed-one, and Kay-two stood with her parents and Nacia.

Zed-one looked confused. "What's the plan?"

She briefly told them what had happened. "We need to take back the Castle, but we'll have to make do with less." The twins jogged up, and she nodded to them, taking a deep breath. "I now declare that the secret of kings is revoked." She told them about the dragon's weakness, ignoring the accusing stares asking the obvious questions. *When did you find this out? How many could have been saved if we'd known earlier?* After she finished, she pressed on without giving anyone a chance to reply. "I have a new plan that only requires you three Guardians."

Faustas crossed his arms, his eyes burning like coals. "We won't need Guardians. The plan is simple. We insert into the basement, heal Daerren, and go throw Solbright out."

"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers," Cadarn murmured.

Haylwen's father looked at her mother, then back to Faustas. "Facing a horde of dragons, we could use every powerful mu we can get, secret of kings or no. Did you find a way to take our Oaths off?"

Faustas shook his head. "Your magic-crippling Oath is a new thing I know nothing about." As an aside under his breath, he murmured to Haylwen, "You could ask the Castle. She'd know how."

Haylwen closed her eyes, linking to the Castle. "Castle, how do I get rid of an Oath?"

Sounding fuzzy and far away, the Castle murmured in her mind. "While in the throne room with the Scepter, have the person recite the Oath taken and the reason for withdrawal. In full command, have the king say, 'Oath revoked.'"

Haylwen's shoulders slumped. Anything they really needed required Haylwen to be inside the Castle. They'd have to wait until the dragons were gone. And right now, there were dragons everywhere. She paused, thinking a question to the Castle. "Castle, how many dragons are in or immediately around you?"

The Castle whispered, her voice growing more faint with every word. "Over 150 dragons inside and approximately 300 in the immediate —"

Haylwen strained to hear. "Castle?" No answer. Her eyes flew open. "She just

cut off abruptly."

Everyone but Faustas looked puzzled. Faustas looked scared.

Haylwen spun to face her parents. "Mom, Dad, sorry, but you'll need to stay here, organize defenses, to try to help the wounded still in the Dragonway. We have to go. Now." Their faces fell, but Haylwen couldn't deal with them now. Her mind spun with the details of her new plan. "Daerren, Rivenwake, can dragons feel a portal opening?"

Daerren made a small motion with his hand. "Depends on the attention of the dragon. I'd say anything is possible with Solbright."

Haylwen pointed at Faustas. "Take Daerren and Rivenwake and do whatever healing you need to do, then join us in the throne room." Faustas nodded.

Cadarn jumped in. "You need a diversion. Nacia and I can portal into the upper levels of the Castle, then jump-portal to as many levels as we can, striking quickly and jumping away. Make it seem like we have multiple squads attacking, all at the same time. Then we can join you in the throne room."

"Exactly what I was thinking," Haylwen said. "We'll give you two a minute to get started, then the twins and I will portal into the throne room and try to hold the dragons off until Daerren can join us. We can pattern off of one Guardian and one magic user in a magnification illusion. With the twins and I working together, we can make it look like squads of Guardians and magic users, as many as we can hold. I'll keep us all safe in a bubble until Daerren arrives."

"Good plan." Faustas pulled at his mustache. "As soon as you're within the Castle, your power level should blossom, and you can establish emergency protocols. The Castle should even be able to draw power off of the dragons to give to you. Once Daerren faces her, Solbright will run."

Haylwen didn't remind him she'd already tried the emergency protocols before they'd been forced to flee, and they hadn't worked. He must not have believed her, and since the plan didn't change either way, now wasn't the time to argue with him. She didn't know where Solbright was getting her power, but the Castle couldn't block it. Haylwen's parents hugged her, Cadarn, and even Nacia and the twins. Exchanging words and bows with the dragons and Guardians, they left.

With a glance at Haylwen, Cadarn popped open a portal. He and Nacia shared a look, then with a blushing grin, grabbed hands and jumped through the portal together.

Haylwen's chest filled and dropped, feeling both happy for and jealous of Cadarn. She looked at Rivenwake, and her heart wouldn't let her keep silent. "While we wait for Cadarn, may I have a moment?" she asked him, stepping away from the others.

Rivenwake stiffened but joined her. His eyes held fierceness, something she'd never seen in him before. She threw her gaze down, took a breath, then looked up, ready for anger in his eyes. But it wasn't there. Just an icy coldness, a completely calm face greeting her. It was worse than anger.

"May I help you?" Rivenwake's voice, flat as his face, chilled her.

Haylwen's thoughts raced. Her heart ached with what she'd really like to say, what she didn't even dare put into her thoughts. None of them kingly. "What's the matter?" she finally blurted.

Not answering, he stood still, only his jaw muscles clenching for a moment. Haylwen sensed he was waiting for her to say something else. Just when she thought she might, he answered.

"The Flows are all a mess." His eyes flared for a moment as he threw his hands up, swirling them around his head, then letting them fall to hang stiffly at his sides. "You really have no choice. And I have no choice either. Daerren needs me there, and we need you to help him." His face softened for an instant, his eyes searching hers before resuming its mask. His usually full lips pressed into a thin line, his jaw muscles tight.

Haylwen felt the fear leaking from him. Rivenwake couldn't hurt Solbright, but she could kill him. "I know you're scared," Haylwen said. "I can feel it. But Daerren will be there, and Faustas said you won't have to fight Solbright or any fire dragon."

Rivenwake blinked several times, and then one eyebrow shot up. "You think I'm scared for myself?" He shook his head, mouth twisting. "I am not scared for me. I've been swimming with death for a hundred years. I'm scared for you, blindly diving into death's ocean. I fear not my own end, but my continuing on without you. How can you possibly face Solbright and her army of dragons? The only thing I can see in your Flows is complete destruction. Powerless to help, I see somehow I might even help to cause it."

Dumbfounded, Haylwen only heard her own heart pounding.

Rivenwake reached out, touching her cheek in a gentle caress. "That should be enough time for Cadarn to cause a commotion." He turned and walked away.

Haylwen tried to swallow as she rejoined the group. "Now," she croaked.

Faustas led Daerren through his portal. Haylwen's heart skipped a beat when Rivenwake paused to look at her before stepping through behind them.

Haylwen faced the twins and Guardians. "Now it's our turn." The twins glanced up at the Guardians and nodded. "Vora, you're with me, Zed-one with Doakren, Kay-two with Oakren." Haylwen opened a portal. "I'm going to transform into a Guardian again after we're in the Castle."

"But you need to use magic," Vora said.

Haylwen shook her head. "I could use magic the last time I was in Guardian form."

Vora muttered under her breath, "Only dragons, kings, and the Hidden can use magic to be bidden." She jumped into the portal, and the other two Guardians followed. The twins exchanged a gesture and jumped in.

They were really going to do it. Once again, off to fight dragons. But this time, she didn't go alone. With three Guardians, the power of six magic users holding the

secret of kings, and the unstoppable head of the Earth dragons, not even Solbright could stop them.

Haylwen grinned ferociously and dove into the portal.

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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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