

ROBIN HOBB

Dragon Haven

HARPER
Voyager

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*Day the 5th of the Prayer Moon
Year the 6th of the Independent Alliance of Traders*

*From Ereĸ, Keeper of the Birds, Bingtown to Detozi, Keeper of the
Birds, Trehaug*

*A message from Trader Jurden to be delivered to the Trehaug Rain
Wild Traders' Council, regarding an order for Sevirian cutlery and
the unfortunate shortage that has caused an unexpected and
substantial increase in the price for it.*

Detozi,

*Greetings! The king pigeons have proven disappointing for speed and
homing ability, but their swift breeding habits and quick growth to size
make me wonder if there is an opportunity to create a supply of food birds
that might be especially suitable to raising in the Rain Wilds. Your
thoughts on this?*

Ereĸ

PROLOGUE

The humans were agitated. Sintara sensed their darting, stinging thoughts, as annoying as a swarm of biting insects. The dragon wondered how humans had ever managed to survive when they could not keep their thoughts to themselves. The irony was that despite spraying out every fancy that passed through their small minds, they didn't have the strength of intellect to sense what their fellows were thinking. They tottered through their brief lives, misunderstanding one another and almost every other creature in the world. It had shocked her the first time she realized that the only way they could communicate with one another was to make noises with their mouths and then to guess what the other human meant by the noises it made in response. 'Talking' they called it.

For a moment, she stopped blocking the barrage of squeaking and tried to determine what had agitated the dragon keepers today. As usual, there was no coherence to their concerns. Several were worried about the copper dragon that had fallen ill. It was not as if they could do much about it; she wondered why they were flapping about it instead of attending to their duties for the other dragons.

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She was hungry, and no one had brought her anything today, not even a fish.

She strolled listlessly down the riverbank. There was little to see here, only a strip of gravel and mud, reeds and a few scrawny saplings. Thin sunlight touched her back but gave small warmth. No game of any size lived here. There might be fish in the river, but the effort of catching one was scarcely worth the small pleasure of eating it. Now, if someone else brought it to her . . .

She thought about summoning Thymara and insisting the girl go hunting for her. From what she had overheard from the keepers, they'd remain on this forsaken strip of beach until the copper dragon either recovered or died. She considered that for a moment. If the copper died, that would make a substantial meal for whichever dragon got there first. And that, she decided bitterly, would be Mercor. The gold dragon was keeping watch. She sensed that he suspected some danger to the copper but he was guarding his thoughts now, not letting dragons or keepers know what he was thinking. That alone made her feel wary.

She would have asked him outright what danger he feared if she hadn't been so angry at him. With no provocation at all, he had given her true name to the keepers. Not just to Thymara and Alise, her own keepers. That would have been bad enough. But no, he had trumpeted her true name out as if it were his to share. That he and most of the other dragons had chosen to share their true names with their keepers meant nothing to her; if they wanted to be foolishly trusting, it was up to them. She didn't interfere between him and *his* keeper. Why had he felt so free about unbalancing her relationship with Thymara? Now that the girl knew her true name, Sintara could only hope that she had no idea of how to use it. No dragon could lie to someone who demanded the truth with

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her true name or used it properly when asking a question. Refuse to answer, of course, but not lie. Nor could a dragon break an agreement if she entered into it under her true name. It was an unconscionable amount of power that he had given to a human with the life span of a fish.

She found an open place on the beach and lowered her body onto the sun-warmed river stones, closed her eyes and sighed. Should she sleep? No. Resting on the chilly ground did not appeal to her.

Reluctantly, she opened her mind again, to try to get some idea of what the humans had planned. Someone else was whining about blood on his hands. The elder of her keepers was in an emotional storm as to whether she should return home to live in boredom with her husband or mate with the captain of the ship. Sintara made a grumble of disgust. There was not even a decision to ponder there. Alise was agonizing over trivialities. It didn't matter what she did, any more than it mattered where a fly landed. Humans lived and died in a ridiculously short amount of time. Perhaps that was why they made so much noise when they were alive. Perhaps it was the only way they could convince one another of their significance.

Dragons made sounds, it was true, but they did not depend on those sounds to convey their thoughts. Sound and utterances were useful when one had to blast through the clutter of human thought and attract the attention of another dragon. Sound was useful to make humans in general focus on what a dragon was trying to convey to it. She would not have minded human sounds so much if they did not persist in spouting out their thoughts at the same time as they tried to convey them with their squeaking. The dual annoyance sometimes made her wish she could just eat them and be done with them.

She released her frustration as a low rumble. The humans

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were useless annoyances, and yet fate had forced the dragons to rely on them. When the dragons had hatched from their cases, emerging from their metamorphosis from sea serpent to dragon, they had wakened to a world that did not match their memories of it. Not decades but centuries had passed since dragons had last walked this world. Instead of emerging able to fly, they had come out as badly-formed parodies of what a dragon was supposed to be, trapped on a swampy riverbank beside an impenetrable forested wetlands. The humans had grudgingly aided them, bringing them carcasses to feed on and tolerating their presence as they waited for them to die off or muster the strength to leave. For years, they had starved and suffered, fed barely enough to keep them alive, trapped between the forest and the river.

And then Mercor conceived of a plan. The golden dragon concocted the tale of a half-remembered city of an ancient race, and the vast treasures that surely resided there still, waiting to be rediscovered. It did not particularly bother any of the dragons that only the memory of Kelsingra, an Elderling city built to a scale that welcomed dragons, was a true memory. If a treasure of glittering riches was the false bait it took to encourage the humans to help them, so be it.

And so the trap was set, the rumour spread, and when sufficient time had passed, the humans had offered to assist the dragons as they sought to rediscover the Elderling city of Kelsingra. An expedition was mounted, with a barge and boats, hunters to kill for the dragons, keepers to see to the needs of the dragons as they escorted them upriver and back to a city they recalled clearly only when they dreamed. The grubby little merchants who held power in the city did not give them their best, of course. Only two real hunters were hired to provide for over a dozen dragons. The 'keepers' the Traders had selected for them were mostly adolescent humans,

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the misfits of their population, those they preferred would not survive and breed. The youngsters were marked with scales and growths, changes the other Rain Wilders wished not to see. The best that could be said of them was that they were mostly tractable and diligent in caring for the dragons. But they had no memories from their forebears, and skittered through their lives with only the minimal knowledge of the world that they could gather in their own brief existence. It was hard to hold converse with one, even when she had no intent of seeking intelligent dialogue. As simple a command as ‘go bring me meat’ was usually met with whining about how difficult it was to find game and queries such as, ‘Did not you eat but a few hours ago?’ as if such words would somehow change her mind about her needs.

Sintara alone of the dragons had had the foresight to claim two keepers as her servants instead of one. The older human, Alise, was of little use as a hunter, but she was a willing if not adept groomer and had a correct and respectful attitude. Her younger keeper Thymara was the best of the hunters among the keepers, but suffered from an unruly and impertinent nature. Still, having two keepers assured her that one was almost always available for her needs, at least for as long as their brief lives lasted. She hoped that would be long enough.

For most of a moon cycle, the dragons had trudged up the river, staying to the shallows near the densely-grown river bank. The banks of the river were too thickly forested, too twined with vines and creepers, too tangled with reaching roots to provide walking space for the dragons. Their hunters ranged ahead of them, their keepers followed in their small boats, and last of all came the liveship *Tarman*, a long, low river barge that smelled much of dragon and magic. Mercor was intrigued with the so-called ‘liveship’. Most of the dragons,

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including Sintara, found the ship unsettling and almost offensive. The hull of the ship had been carved from ‘wizardwood’ which was not wood at all, but the remains of a dead sea serpent’s cocoon. The timber that such ‘wood’ yielded was very hard and impervious to rain and weather. The humans valued it highly. But to dragons, it smelled of dragon-flesh and memories. When a sea serpent wove its case to protect it while it changed into a dragon, it contributed saliva and memories to the special clay and sand it regurgitated. Such wood was, in its own way, sentient. The painted eyes of the ships were far too knowing for Sintara’s liking, and Tarman moved upriver against the current far more easily than any ordinary ship should. She avoided the barge, and spoke little to his captain. The man had never seemed to wish to interact with the dragons much. For a moment, that thought lodged in Sintara’s mind. Was there a reason he avoided them? He did not seem cowed by dragons, as some humans did.

Or repulsed. Sintara thought of Sedric and snorted disdainfully. The fussy Bingtown man trailed after her keeper Alise, carrying her pens and paper, sketching dragons and writing down snippets of information as Alise passed it on to him. He was so dull of brain that he could not even understand the dragons when they spoke to him. He heard her speech as ‘animal sounds’ and had rudely compared it to the mooing of a cow! No. Captain Leftrin was nothing like Sedric. He was not deaf to the dragons, and obviously he did not consider them unworthy of his attention. So why did he avoid them? Was he hiding something?

Well, he was a fool if he thought he could conceal anything from a dragon. She dismissed her brief concern. Dragons could sort through a human’s mind as easily as a crow could peck apart a pile of dung. If Leftrin or any other human had a secret, they were welcome to keep it. Human lives were so

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short that knowing a human was scarcely worth the effort. At one time, Elderlings had been worthy companions for dragons. They had lived much longer than humans, and been clever enough to compose songs and poetry that honoured dragons. In their wisdom, they had made their public buildings and even some of their more palatial homes hospitable to dragon guests. Her ancestral memories informed her of fattened cattle, of warm shelters that welcomed dragons during the wintry season, of scented oil baths that soothed itching scales and other thoughtful amenities the Elderlings had contrived for them. It was a shame they were gone from the world. A shame.

She tried to imagine Thymara as an Elderling, but it was impossible. Her young keeper lacked the proper attitude towards dragons. She was disrespectful, sullen, and far too fascinated with her own firefly existence. She had spirit, but employed it poorly. Her older keeper, Alise, was even more unsuitable. Even now, she could sense the woman's underlying uncertainty and misery. An Elderling female had to share something of a dragon queen's decisiveness and fire. Did either of her tenders have the potential for them? She wondered. What would it take to put spurs to them, to test their mettle? Was it worth the effort of challenging them to see what they were made of?

Something was poking her. Reluctantly, she opened her eyes and lifted her head. She rolled to her feet, shook herself, and then lay down again. As she began to lower her head, movement in the tall rushes caught her eyes. Game? She fixed her gaze. No. Nothing more than two of the keepers leaving the beach and heading into the forest. She recognized them. One was a female, Jerd, keeper to Veras. The green dragon's keeper was tall for a human female, with a brush of blond hair cresting her head. Thymara didn't like her. Sintara knew that

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without precisely knowing why. With her was Greft. She blew out softly through her nostrils. She had little use for Kalo's keeper. Greft might tend the huge blue-black dragon and keep him gleaming, but not even Kalo trusted him. All of the dragons had misgivings about him. Thymara regarded him with both interest and fear. He fascinated her, and Thymara resented that fascination.

Sintara snuffed the wind, caught the scents of the retreating keepers and half-closed her eyes. She knew where they were bound.

An intriguing thought came to her. She suddenly glimpsed a way to measure her keeper, but would it be worth the effort? Perhaps. Perhaps not. She stretched out on the warmed rocks again, vainly wishing they were sun-scorched banks of sand. She waited.

Day the 5th of the Prayer Moon

Year the 6th of the Independent Alliance of Traders

From Ereĳ, Keeper of the Birds, Bingtown to Detozi, Keeper of the Birds, Trehaug

Enclosed, a missive from Trader Polon Meldar to Sedic Meldar, to ascertain that all is well and ask his date of return.

Detozi,

There seems to be some concern over the well-being of some Bingtown residents who were scheduled to visit Cassarick, but now seem to have moved beyond it. Two anxious parents have separately visited me today, promising a bonus if news returns swiftly. I know you are not on the best of terms with the Keeper of the Birds in Cassarick, but perhaps this once, you might use that connection to see if there are any tidings of either Sedic Meldar or Alise Kincarron Finbok. The Finbok woman comes from a wealthy family. Good tidings of reassurance might be amply rewarded.

Ereĳ

CHAPTER ONE

Suspicious

The sucking grey mud pulled at her boots and slowed her down. Alise watched Leftrin walking away from her towards the huddled dragon keepers as she struggled to break free of the earth's grip and go after him. 'Metaphor for my life,' she muttered savagely and resolutely stepped up her pace. A moment later, it occurred to her that just a few weeks ago, she would have regarded crossing the riverbank as not only a bit adventurous, but as a taxing walk. Today, it was only a muddy patch to get across, and one that was not particularly difficult. 'I'm changing,' she said to herself, and was jolted when she sensed Skymaw's assent.

Do you listen in on all my thoughts? She queried the dragon and received no acknowledgement at all. She wondered uneasily if the dragon were aware of her attraction to Leftrin and of the details of her unhappy marriage. Almost immediately, she resolved to protect her privacy by not thinking of such things. And then recognized the futility of that. *No wonder dragons think so poorly of us, if they are privy to every one of our thoughts.*

I assure you, most of what you think about we find so

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uninteresting that we don't even bother having opinions about it. Skymaw's response floated into her mind. Bitterly, the dragon added, My true name is Sintara. You may as well have it; all the others know it now that Mercor has flung it to the wind.

It was exciting to communicate, mind to mind, with such a fabulous creature. She ventured a compliment. *I am overjoyed to finally hear your true name. Sintara. Its glory is fitting to your beauty.*

A stony silence met her thought. Sintara did not ignore her; she offered her only emptiness. Alise attempted to smooth things over with a question. *What happened to the brown dragon? Is he ill?*

The copper dragon hatched from her case as she is, and she has survived too long, Sintara replied callously.

She?

Stop thinking at me!

Alise stopped herself before she could think an apology. She judged it would only annoy the dragon more. And she had nearly caught up to Leftrin. The crowd of keepers that had clustered around the brown dragon was dispersing. The big gold dragon and his small pink-scaled keeper were the lone guardians by the time she arrived at Leftrin's side. As she approached, the gold dragon lifted his head and fixed his gleaming black eyes on her. She felt the 'push' of his regard. Leftrin abruptly turned to her.

'Mercor wants us to leave the brown alone,' he told her.

'But, but, the poor thing may need our help. Has anyone found out what is wrong with him? Or her, perhaps?' She wondered if Sintara had been mistaken or were mocking her.

The gold dragon spoke directly to her then, the first time he had done so. His deep bell-like voice resonated in her lungs as his thoughts filled her head. 'Relpda has parasites eating

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her from the inside, and a predator has attacked her. I stand watch over her, to be sure that all remember that dragons are dragons' business.'

'A predator?' She was horrified.

'Go away,' Mercor told her, ungently. 'It is not your concern.'

'Walk with me,' Leftrin suggested strongly. The captain started to take her arm, and then abruptly withdrew his hand. Her heart sank. Sedric's words had worked their mischief. Doubtless Sedric had thought it his duty to remind Captain Leftrin that Alise was a married woman. Well, his rebuke had done its damage. Nothing would ever be easy and relaxed between them again. Both of them would always be thinking of propriety. If her husband Hest himself had suddenly appeared and stood between them, she could not have felt his presence more strongly.

Nor hated him more.

That shocked her. She hated her husband?

She had known that he hurt her feelings, that he neglected her and humiliated her, that she disliked his manner with her. But she hated him? She'd never allowed herself to think of him in such a way, she realized.

Hest was handsome and educated, charming and well-mannered. To others. She was allowed to spend his wealth as she pleased, as long as she did not bother him. Her parents thought she had married well and most of the women of her acquaintance envied her.

And she hated him. That was that. She had walked some way in silence at Leftrin's side before he cleared his throat, breaking in on her thoughts. 'I'm sorry,' she apologized reflexively. 'I was preoccupied.'

'I don't think there's much we can do to change things,' he said sadly, and she nodded, attaching his words to her inner turmoil before he changed their significance by adding, 'I don't

think anyone can help the brown dragon. She will live or she'll die. And we'll be stuck here until she decides she's doing one or the other.'

'It's so hard to think of her as female. It makes me doubly sad that she is so ill. There are so few female dragons left. So I don't mind. I don't mind being stuck here, I mean.' She wished he would offer her his arm. She'd decided she'd take it.

There was no clear dividing line between the shore and the river's flow. The mud got sloppier and wetter and then it was the river. They both stopped well short of the moving water. She could feel her boots sinking. 'Nowhere for us to go, is there?' Leftrin offered.

She glanced behind them. There was the low riverbank of trampled grasses and beyond that a snagged forest edge of old driftwood and brush before the real forest began. From where she stood, it looked impenetrable and forbidding. 'We could try the forest,' she began.

Leftrin gave a low laugh. There was no humour in it. 'That wasn't what I meant. I was talking about you and me.'

Her eyes locked with his. She was startled that he had spoken so bluntly, and then decided that honesty might be the only good thing that could come from Sedric's meddling. There was no reason now for either of them to deny the attraction they felt. She wished she had the courage to take his hand. Instead, she just looked up at him and hoped he could read her eyes. He could. He sighed heavily.

'Alise. What are we going to do?' The question was rhetorical, but she decided she would answer it anyway.

They walked a score of paces before she found the words she truly wanted to say. He was watching the ground as he walked; she spoke to his profile, surrendering all control of her world as she did so. 'I want to do whatever you want to do.'

She saw those words settle on him. She had thought they

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would be like a blessing, but he received them as a burden. His face grew very still. He lifted his eyes. His barge rested on the bank before them and he seemed to meet its sympathetic stare. When he spoke, perhaps he spoke to his ship as much as to her. 'I have to do what is right,' he said regretfully. 'For both of us,' he added, and there was finality in his words.

'I won't be packed off back to Bingtown!'

A smile twisted half his mouth. 'Oh, I'm well aware of that, my dear. No one will be packing you off to anywhere. Where you go, you'll go of your free will or not at all.'

'Just so you understand that,' she said, and tried to sound strong and free. She reached out and took his calloused hand in hers, gripping it tight, feeling the roughness and the strength of it. He squeezed her hand carefully in response. Then he released it.

The day seemed dim. Sedric closed his eyes tightly and then opened them again. It didn't help. Vertigo spun him and he found himself groping for the wall of his compartment. The barge seemed to rock under his feet, but he knew it to be drawn up on the riverbank. Where was the handle to the damn door? He couldn't see. He leaned against the wall, breathing shallowly and fighting not to vomit.

'Are you all right?' A deep voice at his elbow, one that was not unfamiliar. He fought to put his thoughts in order. Carson, the hunter. The one with the full ginger beard. That was who was talking to him.

Sedric took a careful breath. 'I'm not sure. Is the light odd? It seems so dim to me.'

'It's bright today, man. The kind of light where I can't look at the water for too long.' Concern in the man's voice. Why? He scarcely knew the hunter.

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'It seems dim to me.' Sedric tried to speak normally, but his own voice seemed far away and faint.

'Your pupils are like pinheads. Here. Take my arm. Let's ease you down on the deck.'

'I don't want to sit on the deck,' he said faintly, but if Carson heard him, he didn't pay any attention. The big man took him by the shoulders and gently but firmly sat him down on the dirty deck. He hated to think what the rough boards would do to his trousers. Yet the world did seem to rock a little less. He leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes.

'You look like you've been poisoned. Or drugged. You're pale as white river water. I'll be right back. I'm going to get you a drink.'

'Very well,' Sedric said faintly. The man was just a darker shadow in a dim world. He felt the man's footsteps on the deck and even those faint vibrations seemed sickening. Then he was gone and Sedric felt other vibrations. Fainter and not rhythmic as the footsteps had been. They weren't even really vibrations, he thought sickly. But they were something, something bad and they were directed towards him. Something knew what he had done to the brown dragon and hated him for it. Something old and powerful and dark was judging him. He closed his eyes tighter but that only made the malevolence seem closer.

The footsteps returned and then grew louder. He sensed the hunter crouch down by him. 'Here. Drink this. It'll buck you up.'

He took the warm mug in his hands, smelling the dreadful coffee. He raised it to his lips and took a sip, and found the bite of harsh rum hidden in the coffee. He tried to keep from spitting it on himself, choked, swallowed it, and then coughed. He wheezed in a breath and then opened his watering eyes.

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‘Is that better?’ the sadistic bastard asked him.

‘Better?’ Sedric demanded furiously, and heard his voice more strongly. He blinked away tears and could see Carson crouched on the deck in front of him. His ginger beard was lighter than his unruly mop of hair. His eyes were not brown, but that much rarer black. He was smiling at Sedric, his head cocked a little to one side. Like a cocker spaniel, Sedric thought viciously. He moved his boots against the deck, trying to get his feet under him.

‘Let’s walk you into the galley, shall we?’ He took the mug from Sedric’s hands, then with apparent ease, seized him by the upper arm and hauled him to his feet.

Sedric’s head felt wobbly on his neck. ‘What’s wrong with me?’

‘How should I know?’ the man asked him affably. ‘You drink too much last night? You might have bought bad liquor in Trehaug. And if you bought any liquor in Cassarick, then it’s almost definitely rotgut. They’ll ferment anything there, roots, peelings from fruit. Lean on me, don’t fight me now. I knew one fellow tried to ferment fish skins. Not even the whole fish, just the skins. He was convinced it would work. Here. Mind your head. Sit down at the galley table. Could be if you eat something, it’ll absorb whatever you drank and you’ll be able to pass it.’

Carson, he realized, stood a head taller than he did. And was a lot stronger. The hunter moved him along the deck and into the deckhouse and sat him down at the galley table as if he were a mother harrying a recalcitrant child to his place. The man’s voice was deep and rumbling, almost soothing if one overlooked his uncouth way of putting things. Sedric braced his elbows on the sticky galley table and lowered his face into his hands. The smells of grease, smoke and old food were making him feel worse.

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Carson busied himself in the galley, putting something in a bowl and then pouring hot water from the kettle over it. He stood for a time, jabbing at it with a spoon before he brought it to the table. Sedric lifted his head, looked at the mess in the bowl and belched suddenly. The dark red taste of dragon blood rose up in his mouth and flooded his nose again. He thought again that he might faint.

‘You got to feel better after that,’ Carson observed approvingly. ‘Here. Eat some of this. It will settle your gut.’

‘What is it?’

‘Hardtack softened with hot water. Works like a sponge in the gut, if you got a man with a sour belly or one you got to sober up fast for a day’s work.’

‘It looks disgusting.’

‘Yes, it does. Eat it.’

He hadn’t had any food, and the aftertaste of the dragon blood still lingered in his mouth and nose. Anything, he reasoned, had to be better than that. He took up the wide spoon and stirred the muck.

The hunter’s boy Davvie entered the deckhouse. ‘What’s going on?’ he demanded. There was a note of urgency in his voice that puzzled Sedric. He put a spoonful of soggy hardtack in his mouth. It was all texture and no taste.

‘Nothing you need to worry about, Davvie.’ Carson was firm with the boy. ‘And you have work to do. Get after mending those nets. I’m betting we won’t be moving from here for most of the day. We set a net out in the current, we may get a haul of fish, maybe two. But only if the net is mended. So get to it.’

‘What about him, what’s the matter with him?’ The boy’s voice sounded almost accusing.

‘He’s sick, not that it’s any of your business. You get about your work and leave your elders and your betters to their own. Out.’

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Davvie didn't quite slam the door but shut it more firmly than he needed to. 'Boys!' Carson exclaimed in disgust. 'They think they know what they want, but if I gave it to him – well, he'd find out that he just wasn't ready for it. But I'm sure you know what I mean.'

Sedric swallowed the sticky mass in his mouth. It had absorbed the dragon blood taste. He ate another spoonful, and then realized that Carson was looking at him, waiting for a response. 'I don't have any children. I'm not married,' he said, and took another spoonful. Carson had been right. His stomach was settling and his head was clearing.

'I didn't think you did.' Carson smiled as if at a shared joke. 'I don't either. But you looked to me like someone who would have had some experience of boys like Davvie.'

'No. I haven't.' He was grateful for the man's rustic remedy, but he wished he'd stop talking to him and go away. His own whirling thoughts filled his head and he felt he needed time to sort them rather than filling his brain with polite conversation. Carson's words about poison had unsettled him. Whatever had he been thinking, to put dragon's blood in his mouth? He couldn't remember the impulse to do so, only that he'd done it. His only intention had been to take blood and scales from the beast. Dragon parts were worth a fortune, and a fortune was what he was after. He wasn't proud of what he'd done, but he'd had to do it. He had no choice. The only way that he and Hest would ever leave Bingtown together would be if Sedric could amass the wealth to finance it. Dragon blood and dragon scales would buy him the life he'd always dreamed of.

It had seemed so simple, when he'd crept away from the boat to harvest what he needed from the sickly dragon. The creature was obviously dying. What would it matter to anyone if Sedric took a few scales? The glass vials had weighed heavy

in his hands as he filled them with blood. He'd meant to sell it to the Duke of Chalced as a remedy for his aches and pains and advancing age. He'd never even considered drinking it himself. He could not even remember wanting to drink it, let alone deciding that he would.

Dragon blood was reputed to have extraordinary healing powers, but perhaps like other medicines, it could be toxic too. Had he truly poisoned himself? Was he going to be all right? He wished he could ask someone; it came to him abruptly that Alise might know. She'd done so much research on dragons, surely she must know something about the effects their blood could have on a man. But how could he ask such a question? Was there any way to frame it that didn't incriminate him?

'That pudding helping your stomach at all?'

Sedric looked up suddenly, and regretted it. Vertigo rocked him briefly and then cleared. 'Yes. Yes, it is.' The hunter sat down across from him and kept looking at him. Those black eyes locked with his own, as if they wished to see inside Sedric's head. He looked down at his bowl and forced himself to take another mouthful of the stuff. It was helping his stomach, but he didn't enjoy the experience of eating it. He glanced up again at the watchful hunter. 'Thank you for your help. I don't mean to keep you from your duties. I'm sure I'll be fine now. As you say, it was probably something I drank or ate. So you needn't bother about me.'

'It's no bother.'

Again the man waited, as if there was something he expected Sedric to say. He was at a loss. He looked down at his 'food' again. 'I'm fine, then. Thank you.'

And still the man lingered, but now Sedric refused to look up from his bowl. He ate steadily in small bites, trying to seem as if it demanded all his attention. The hunter's

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attention flustered him. When he rose from his seat across the table, Sedric repressed a sigh of relief. As Carson passed behind Sedric, he put a heavy hand on his shoulder and leaned down to speak right next to his ear. 'We should talk some time,' he said quietly. 'I suspect we have far more in common than you know. Perhaps we should trust one another.'

He knows. The thought sliced through Sedric's aplomb and he nearly choked on his mouthful of sodden bread. 'Perhaps,' he managed to say, and felt the grip on his shoulder tighten briefly. The hunter chuckled as he lifted his hand and left the deckhouse. As the door shut firmly behind him, Sedric pushed the bowl away and cradled his head on his arms. *Now what?* He asked the enclosed darkness. *Now what?*

The brown dragon looked dead. Thymara longed to go closer and have a better look at her, but the golden dragon standing over her intimidated her. Mercor had scarcely moved since the last time she had walked past them. His gleaming black eyes fixed on her now. He did not speak but she felt the mental push he gave her. 'I'm only worried about her,' she said aloud. Sylve had been dozing, leaned back against her dragon's front leg. She opened her eyes at the sound of Thymara's voice. She gave Mercor an apologetic glance and then came over to Thymara.

'He's suspicious,' she said. 'He thinks someone hurt the brown dragon on purpose. So he's standing watch to protect her.'

'To protect her, or to be first to eat her when she dies?' Thymara managed to keep all accusation out of her voice.

Sylve did not take offence. 'To protect her. He has seen too many of the dragons die since they came out of their cocoons. There are so few females that even one that is stunted and

dull-witted must be protected.’ She laughed in an odd way and added, ‘Rather like us.’

‘What?’

‘Like us keepers. Only four of us are females and all the rest males. Mercor says that no matter how deformed we are, the males must protect us.’

The statement left Thymara speechless. Without thinking, she lifted her hand to her face, touching the scales that traced her jawline and cheekbones. She considered the ramifications of it and then said bluntly, ‘We can’t marry or mate, Sylve. We all know the rules, even if Mercor does not. The Rain Wilds marked most of us from the day we were born, and we all know what it means. A shorter life span. If we do conceive, most of our children aren’t viable. By custom, most of us should have been exposed at birth. We all know why we were chosen for this expedition, and it wasn’t just so we could care for the dragons. It was to get rid of us as well.’

Sylve stared at her for a long moment. Then she said quietly, ‘What you say is true, or used to be true for us. But Grefth says we can change the rules. He says that when we get to Kelsingra, it will become our city where we will live with our dragons. And we will make our own rules. About everything.’

Thymara was appalled at the girl’s gullibility. ‘Sylve, we don’t even know if Kelsingra still exists. It’s probably buried in the mud like the other Elderling cities. I never really believed we’d get to Kelsingra. I think the best we can really hope for is to find a place suitable for the dragons to live.’

‘And then what?’ Sylve demanded. ‘We leave them there and go back home, back to Trehaug? And do what? Go back to living in shadows and shame, apologizing for existing? I won’t do it, Thymara. A lot of the keepers have said they won’t do it. Wherever our dragons settle, that’s where we’re

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staying, too. So there will be a new place for us. And new rules.'

A loud snapping sound distracted Thymara. She and Sylve both turned to see Mercor stretching. He had lifted his golden wings and extended them to their full length. Thymara was surprised to see not only the size of them but that they were marked with eyes like a peacock's feathers. As she watched, he flapped them again, sharply, gusting wind and the scent of dragon at her. She watched him refold them awkwardly, as if moving them were an unfamiliar task. He snugged them firmly to his back again and resumed his watchful stance over the brown dragon.

Thymara was suddenly aware that a communication had passed between Mercor and Sylve. The dragon had not made a sound, but she had sensed something even if Thymara were not a party to it. Sylve gave her an apologetic look and asked, 'Are you going hunting today?'

'I might. It doesn't look as if we're going to do any travelling today.' She tried not to think of the obvious; that until the brown died they were all stuck here.

'If you do and you get fresh meat . . .'

'I'll share what I can,' Thymara replied instantly. She tried not to regret the promise. Meat for Sintara, and meat for the sickly copper and the dim-witted silver dragon. Why had she ever volunteered to help care for them? She couldn't even keep Sintara well fed. And now she had just said she'd try to bring meat for Sylve's golden dragon Mercor. She hoped the hunters were going out as well.

In the days since the dragons had made their first kill, they had learned to do some hunting and fishing for themselves. None of them were exceptional predators. Dragons were meant to hunt on the wing, not lumber after prey on the ground. Nonetheless, all of them had enjoyed some success. The change

in diet to freshly-killed meat and fish seemed to have affected almost all of them. They were thinner, but more muscular. As she strode past some of the dragons, she looked at them critically. With surprise, she realized that they now more closely resembled the depictions of dragons she had seen in various Elderling artefacts. She halted where she was to watch them for a moment.

Arbuc, a silver-green male, was splashing along in the shallows. Every now and then he thrust his whole head into the water, much to the amusement of Alum, his keeper. Alum waded alongside, fish spear at the ready, even as his frolicking dragon drove off any possible game. As she watched, Arbuc spread his wings. They were ridiculously long for him, but he beat them anyway, battering water up and showering Alum with it. His keeper yelled his disapproval and the dragon stopped and stood puzzled, his arched wings dripping. She looked at him and wondered.

Abruptly, she turned her steps and went looking for Sintara. *Sintara, not Skymaw*, she reminded herself moodily. Why had it injured her pride so much to learn that some of the dragons had never concealed their true names from their keepers? Jerd had probably known her dragon's name since the first day. Sylve had. She clenched her teeth. Sintara was more beautiful than any of them. Why did she have to have such a difficult temperament?

She found the blue dragon sprawled disconsolately on a patch of muddy reeds and grasses. The dragon rested her head on her front paws and stared out at the moving water. She didn't lift her head or give any indication she was aware of Thymara until she spoke. 'We should be moving, not waiting here. There are not many days left before the winter rains, and when they come, the river will run deeper and swifter. We should be using this time to seek for Kelsingra.'

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‘Then you think we should leave the brown dragon?’

‘Relpda,’ Sintara replied, a vindictive note creeping into her thoughts. ‘Why should her true name remain unknown while mine is not?’ Sintara lifted her head and suddenly stretched out her front feet and extended her claws. ‘And she would be copper, not brown, if proper care were given to her. Look here. I’ve split a claw end. It’s from too much walking in the water over rock. I want you to get twine and bind it for me. Coat it with some of that tar you used on the silver’s tail.’

‘Let me see.’ The claw was frayed and softened from too much time in water. It had begun to split at the end, but luckily it hadn’t reached the quick yet. ‘I’ll go ask Captain Leftrin if he has twine and tar to spare. While we’re at it, let’s look at the rest of you. Are your other claws all right?’

‘They’re all getting a bit soft,’ Sintara admitted. She stretched her other front foot towards Thymara and spread her toes, extending her claws. Thymara bit her lip as she checked them; they were all slightly frayed at the ends, like hard driftwood finally surrendering to damp. Thinking of wood gave her a possible solution. ‘I wonder if we could oil them. Or varnish them to keep the water away.’

The dragon twitched her foot back, very nearly knocking Thymara over. She examined her claws herself and then responded with a reserved, ‘Perhaps.’

‘Stand up and stretch out, please. I need to check you for dirt and parasites.’

The dragon rumbled a protest but slowly obeyed. Thymara walked slowly around her. She hadn’t imagined the changes. Sintara had lost weight, but gained muscle. The constant immersion in river water was not good for her scales, but walking against the current was strengthening the dragon. ‘Open your wings, please,’ Thymara requested.

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'I'd rather not,' Sintara replied primly.

'Do you want to shelter parasites in their folds?'

The dragon rumbled again, but gave her wings a shudder and then unfolded them. The skin clung together like a parasol stored too long in the damp, and smelled unpleasant. Her scales looked unhealthy, the feathery edges showing white, like layers of leaves going to mould.

'This is not good,' Thymara exclaimed in dismay. 'Don't you ever wash them? Or shake them out and exercise them? Your skin needs sunlight. And a good scrubbing.'

'They're not so bad,' the dragon hissed.

'No. They're damp in the folds and smelly. At least leave them unfolded to air while I go get something to help your claws.' Heedless of Sintara's dignity, she seized the tip of one of the dragon's finger-ribs and pulled the wing out straight. The dragon tried to close her wing but Thymara held on stubbornly. It was entirely too easy for her to hold the wing open. The dragon's muscles should have been stronger. She tried to think of the right word for it. Atrophy. Sintara's wing muscles were atrophying from disuse. 'Sintara, if you don't listen to me and take care of your wings, soon you won't be able to move them at all.'

'Don't even think such a thing!' the dragon hissed at her. She gave a violent flap and Thymara lost her grip and fell to her knees in the mud. She looked up at the dragon as she began indignantly to fold her wings again.

'Wait. Wait, what's that? Sintara, open your wing again. Let me look under it. That looked like a rasp snake under there!'

The dragon halted. 'What's a rasp snake?'

'They live in the canopy. They're skinny as twigs but long. They're really fast when they strike, and they have a tooth, like an egg tooth, on their snouts. They bite and hold on, and

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dig their heads in. And then they just hang there and feed. I've seen monkeys with so many on them that they look like they have a hundred tails. Usually the animal gets an infection around the head and dies from that. They're nasty. Unfold your wing. Let me look.'

It hung from high under the wing, a long nasty snake-like body. When Thymara braved herself to touch it, the dangling thing suddenly lashed about angrily and Sintara gave a startled chirp of pain. 'What it is? Get it off me!' the dragon exclaimed and thrust her head under her wing and seized the parasite.

'Stop! Don't bite it, don't pull on it. If you rip it off you, the head will tear free and stay inside and make a terrible infection. Let go, Sintara. Let go of it and let me deal with it!'

Sintara's eyes glittered, copper disks whirling, but she obeyed. 'Get it off me.' The dragon spoke in a tight, furious voice and Thymara was jolted to feel, beneath Sintara's anger, her fear. An instant later, Sintara added in a low hiss. 'Hurry. I can feel it moving. It's trying to dig deeper into me. To hide inside my body.'

'Sa save us all!' Thymara exclaimed. Her gorge rose in revulsion and she tried to recall how her father had said one got rid of a little rasp snake. 'Not fire, no. They dig deeper if you put fire to them. There was something else.' She searched her memory desperately, and then had it. 'Whisky. I have to go see if Captain Leftrin has whisky. Don't move.'

'Hurry,' Sintara pleaded.

Thymara ran towards the barge, then caught sight of the captain and Alise strolling together. She changed her course and raced towards them, shouting, 'Captain Leftrin! Captain Leftrin, I need your help!'

At her cries, both the captain and Alise turned and hurried towards her. She was out of breath by the time they reached

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each other, and to Leftrin's worried, 'What's wrong, girl?' she could only reply, 'Rasp snake. On Sintara. Biggest I've ever seen. Going into her chest, under her wing.'

'Those damned things!' he exclaimed and Thymara could only feel gratitude that she didn't have to explain it.

She caught a gasping breath. 'My father used liquor to make them back out.'

'Yes, well, tereben oil works better. Trust me on that. Had to get one out of my own leg once. Come on, girl. I've got some on board. Alise! If one dragon has a rasp snake, chances are the others do, too. Tell the keepers to check their animals. And that brown one, the one that's down? Check her, too. Look on her underbelly. They'll go for a soft place for an easy bite and then dig in.'

Alise felt a surge of purpose as Leftrin turned away from her and headed back towards the barge. She hastened down the beach, going from keeper to keeper, giving the warning. Graft almost immediately found one dangling from Kalo's belly, concealed by one of his hind legs. There were three fastened to Sestican; she'd thought for a moment that his keeper, Lecter, was going to faint when he discovered three short ends of snakes poking out from his dragon's nether regions. She spoke to him sharply to jolt him from his panic, directing him to take his dragon over to where Sintara was and to wait for Leftrin there. The boy seemed shocked that she could speak so severely. He gave a gulp, recovered himself and obeyed her.

She swallowed her own shock at that and hurried on. When she came to Sylve and the golden dragon guarding the dirty brown one, she had to pause and rebuild her courage for a moment. She did not want to confront him; she wanted nothing more than to turn and hasten away. It took her a moment to convince herself that what she felt was not her own cowardice,

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but the dragon's efforts to repulse her. She squared her shoulders and marched up to him and his keeper.

'I'm here to check the brown dragon for parasites. Some of the other dragons have been attacked by rasp snakes. Your keeper should check you over while I look at the brown dragon.'

For a time the gold just stared at her. How could solid black eyes glitter so bleakly?

'Rasp snakes?'

'A parasitic burrowing creature. Thymara says she knows of them from the canopy. But these, she thinks, come from the river. They are much larger. It's a snake that bites and eats its way in, to live off your flesh.'

'Disgusting!' Mercor declared. The gold immediately stood and spread his wings. 'It makes me itch to think of it. Sylve, check me for those creatures immediately.'

'I groomed you completely today, Mercor. I do not think I would have missed such a thing. But I will check you.'

'And I must look at the brown dragon to see if he has any,' Alise asserted firmly.

She had expected Mercor to oppose her. Instead, he seemed completely distracted by the thought that he himself might have such a parasite.

Alise ventured towards the impassive copper dragon. She was crumpled on the ground in a way that was going to make inspecting her underbelly difficult if not impossible. And Sylve was right. The coating of mud on the dragon was so even that it almost looked deliberate. It was going to have to come off before she could tell much of anything about the creature.

She glanced helplessly towards Sylve, but the small girl had her hands full with Mercor. An instant later, her first impulse shamed her. What had she thought to do? Summon the Rain Wild child to have her clean the dragon so that Alise could

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inspect her without getting her hands dirty? How arrogant a thought was that? For years, she had been claiming she was an expert on dragons, yet at her first opportunity to tend to one, she quailed at a bit of mud? No. Not Alise Kincarron.

Not far from where the copper dragon sprawled, part of a bank of coarse reeds remained untrampled, their tasselled heads standing half again as tall as Alise. She drew her little belt knife, cut half a dozen of them, folded them into a coarse cushion of reeds and returning to the dragon, began to give her a good scrubbing with it, starting at the creature's upper shoulder.

The dried mud was river silt and it came away surprisingly easily. Alise's coarse brush bared coppery scales that quickly took on a lovely sheen as she worked on the poor creature. Relpda did not make a sound, yet Alise thought she sensed a dim gratitude from the prostrate dragon. She redoubled her efforts, moving her scrubbing rushes down the dragon's spine. As she worked, the size of a dragon was forcibly impressed on, not just her mind, but her muscles. The area of skin to be cleaned suddenly reminded her of the routine work of the crew scrubbing the barge's deck. And this was a small dragon. She glanced over her shoulder at the gleaming gold of Mercor's scaled hide and mentally compared it to the small pink-scalped girl who tended him. How much of each evening did the girl devote to her task?

As if Sylve had sensed her gaze, she turned to Alise. 'He's clean, every inch of him. No snakes on him. I'll help you with Relpda now.'

Her pride made Alise want to say she had her task well in hand. Instead she heard herself say, 'Thank you' with utter gratitude. The girl smiled at her, and for an instant her lips caught a glint of light from the sun. Was her mouth scaled, too? Alise jerked her stare away and renewed her scrubbing

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efforts, sending a cascade of fine silt from Relpda's hip to the damp earth below her. Sylve had not seemed so scaly when she'd first seen the girl. Was she changing as much as the dragons were?

Sylve came to join her, carrying a coarse reed 'brush' of her own. 'This is a really good idea. I've been using evergreen boughs when I can get them, and handfuls of leaves when I can't. But this works much better.'

'If I'd had the time to weave the stems and leaves together, I think it would work even better. But this will get the job done, I think.' Alise had a hard time speaking and scrubbing at the same time. Her years in Hest's house had softened her. As a girl, she'd always helped with the household cleaning; her family had not been able to afford many servants. Now she could feel sweat damping her back and blisters starting to form on her hands. Her shoulder already ached. Well, so be it! A little hard work never hurt anyone. And when she looked back over the area of dragon that she had cleaned, she felt a rush of pride.

'What's this? What's this? Is this a snake hole?' The fear and distress in Sylve's voice seemed to infect her dragon. Mercor came lumbering over and swung his large head down to snort at a spot on the copper dragon's neck.

'What does it look like?' Alise asked, leery of coming closer while the golden was so intent.

'A raw spot. The dirt around it was damp, maybe with blood. She's not bleeding now, but . . .'

'Something jabbed her there,' Mercor opined. 'But it's not a "snake hole" my dear. Still, the blood smell is strong, so she bled quite a bit.'

Alise found her wits. 'I don't think the snakes make a hole and crawl inside. I think they only stick their heads in and drink blood.'

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Mercor stood absolutely still, his head still hanging over the copper dragon. His eyes were black on shining black; still Alise had a sense of that colour slowly swirling in them. He seemed to go away from them for a time. Then he shuddered his coat, rippling his scales in a way that reminded her more of a cat than a reptile. An instant later, she felt again the presence of his mind, and marvelled. If he had not briefly left them, she would never have recognized how strongly he affected her when he was focused on them.

‘I do not know about snakes called rasp snakes. These things you describe, I have heard of, long ago, and then they were called burrowers. They dug in deep. They may be more dangerous than the rasp snakes the other keeper spoke about.’

‘Sa have mercy,’ Sylve said quietly. She stood silently a moment, her rush scrubber still in her hands. Then she abruptly walked around the dragon and pushed her. ‘Relpda!’ she shouted, as if to penetrate the dragon’s stupor. ‘Roll over. I want to see your belly. Roll over!’

To Alise’s astonishment, the sickly dragon stirred. She moved her hind legs feebly against the mud she sprawled in. She lifted a wobbly head, unlidded her eyes, and then let her head drop back to the earth. ‘Move away,’ Mercor directed them roughly, and both women obeyed him promptly, jumping back to be clear of the prone dragon. Mercor lowered his head, thrust his muzzle under Relpda and tried to turn her over. She rumbled a feeble protest and scabbled her legs as if the motion pained her.

‘Is he eating her? I don’t think she’s dead!’ The protest came from another dragon keeper who had suddenly joined him. Rapskal, Alise thought to herself. Was that his name? He was a handsome lad, despite his Rain Wild strangeness. His thick dark hair and black clawed hands contrasted oddly with his pale blue eyes and angelic smile. His dragon was with him,

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a dumpy red creature with stumpy legs and a brilliant sheen to his scales. When Rapskal stopped to stare, the small dragon leaned his head affectionately against his young keeper, nearly knocking him over. ‘Stop it, Heeby. You’re bigger and stronger than you know! Stand up on your own feet.’ There was more affection than rebuke in his voice. He gave his dragon a shove and she playfully nudged him back.

‘Mercor’s not trying to eat her.’ Sylve explained indignantly. ‘He’s trying to turn her over so we can check her belly for parasites. There’s a snake kind of creature—’

‘I know. I was just over watching them get them out of Sestican. Just about made me puke to see them back out, and Lecter was almost crying and blaming himself. I never seen him so broken up before.’

‘But they got them out?’

‘Yes indeed they did. Must have hurt, though. That big blue dragon was squeaking like a mouse as they came out. I don’t know what Captain Leftrin had mixed up, but they put it around the hole where the snake went in and pretty soon it started thrashing its tail, and then it started backing out. Lots of blood and goop come with it, and hoo, what a stink! And then when it finally dropped to the ground, Tats jumped on it and chopped it up with an axe. Made me glad I check my Heeby from top to toe every day. Right, Heeby?’

The red dragon gave a snort in response, and shoved Rapskal again, sending the boy staggering. His account had made Alise feel a bit queasy, but Sylve had other things on her mind. ‘Rapskal, can you get Heeby to help Mercor? We’re trying to turn the copper dragon onto her back.’

‘Well, sure I can. All I got to do is ask her. Hey, Heeby! Heeby, look here, look at me. Heeby, listen. Listen, girl. Help Mercor turn the copper dragon onto her back. Understand? Help him turn her over? Can you do it? Can my big strong

dragon do that for me? Sure she can. Come on, Heeby. Put your nose under here, right here, just like Mercor. That's my girl. Now lift and push, Heeby, lift and push!

The little red dragon dug her feet in. As Alise watched, the muscles in her short thick neck bulged. She made a rumbling noise of great effort and suddenly Relpda began to move. She gave a squeal of pain, but both Mercor and Heeby ignored it. Pushing and grunting, they turned her onto her back. Her legs waved feebly in the air. 'Hold her there, Heeby. That's my girl. Hold her there!' And in response to Rapskal's cries, the small red dragon braced herself and stood with her head butted up against the copper. Her neck muscles bulged, but her golden eyes spun in pleasure at her keeper's loud praises.

'Look there!' Mercor said, and Alise stared in horror. The copper dragon's muddy belly was studded with snake tails. There were at least a dozen, the exposed stubs twitching and writhing because their victim had been moved. Sylve covered her mouth with both her hands and stepped back. She rocked her head from side to side and spoke breathlessly through her fingers.

'She never let me groom her belly. I tried. I did try! She always pulled away from me and rubbed it in the mud. She was trying to get rid of them, wasn't she, Mercor? She wouldn't let me groom her belly because it hurt.'

'Her mind was not clear enough for her to know that you could help her,' Mercor said heavily. 'No one blames you, Sylve. You did what you could for her.'

'Is she dead?' The call reached them, and all heads turned. Thymara and Tats were coming at a trot. Captain Leftrin was behind them. Sintara was following at a more dignified pace. Behind them, half a dozen other keepers and dragons were converging.

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‘No! But she’s infested with them. I don’t know if we can save her.’ Sylve’s voice broke on the words.

‘Try,’ Mercor commanded her sternly, but then he leaned over the girl and gently blew his breath down on her. At most, it could have been a gentle breeze, but Sylve swayed in it. To Alise, the sudden change in the girl’s countenance was stunning. And frightening. Sylve went from a near-hysterical child to a calm woman. She drew herself up taller, glanced up at her dragon and smiled at him.

‘We will.’ She looked over at Alise and said, ‘First, we will use our reed brushes to clean away as much of the mud as we can. Heeby, you will have to hold her in this position, on her back. She will not like what we do, but I think we must clear the mud from her injuries before we can treat them.’

‘That makes sense to me,’ Alise concurred, and wondered where the poise had come from. Was she seeing Sylve as she was when her own doubts didn’t taunt her, or was this, somehow, an overlay of the dragon Mercor? Alise took up her reed scrubber and turned it to a fresh spot. She approached the dragon cautiously. The copper might be small and weak for a dragon, but a kick from any of her gently waving legs would send a human flying. And if she struggled and rolled over onto a keeper, serious injuries would result.

Thymara halted and stared at Alise. For a moment, the Bingtown woman looked like a different person. She was scrubbing away at the belly of the copper dragon, heedless of dust and mud that cascaded onto her trousers and boots. Dust coated her face and her blouse was filthy to the elbows. Even her pale eyelashes were laden with dust. Yet her expression was one of determination, and almost pleasure in her task. When had she changed from being an elegant Bingtown

lady, impeccably dressed and with manners to match? A grudging admiration stirred in Thymara.

Heeby stood, her scarlet head lowered and braced against the copper dragon, pinning her in an ungainly belly-up posture. Rapskal stood at her shoulder, proudly patting his dragon and murmuring praise of her. Mercor hovered over the group, while Sylve appeared to be in charge of the operation. The girl also looked different, Thymara thought, though she could not quite put her finger on what it was.

She took two steps closer and felt ill. Barely-exposed snake tails dotted the dragon's belly. She swallowed hard. It had been awful to watch the writhing parasite exit from Sintara's body. The snake had not been in her long, and most of its body had still been outside the dragon's. Once Leftrin had daubed the strong-smelling tereben oil around the injury, the snake had gone limp, and then suddenly began to lash wildly. The dragon had trumpeted her distress. Thymara had stepped forward hastily and seized the lashing snake by the tail. 'Hold on. I'm applying more oil!' Leftrin had warned her.

At the second application, the snake had become frantic. It had begun to writhe backwards out of the dragon, and as the length of bloody snake emerged, Thymara had forced herself to seize it and hold on lest it try to re-enter the dragon. It had slithered and slipped in her grip. Sintara had blasted news of her pain and the other dragons and keepers had begun to gather round her. As the final length of the snake had emerged, the creature had whipped its head about, splattering Thymara's face with blood as it tried to attack the creature who gripped it. She had shrieked as the blood hit her and flung the animal to the ground. Tats had been ready and waiting with a hatchet. It hadn't got far. She'd stood numbly, shaking with her dragon's shared pain. She'd dragged her sleeve across her face, but it only smeared the thick blood

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more. It had smelled and tasted of dragon, and even now, after she'd washed it off, the clinging scent of it filled her nose and she could not be rid of the taste of it. Afterwards, Leftrin had swabbed the injury with rum and then sealed it over with a daub of tar lest the acid river water ulcerate it. The captain spoke as he worked. 'After this, you'll have to do nightly checks of your dragons. Those snakes got something in their mouths that numbs the flesh. You don't even feel one burrowing in. I got a little one in my leg once, didn't even know it was there until I got out of the water.'

As Alise and Sylve worked, the copper dragon made small sounds of pain. Thymara squatted down beside her to look into her face, but the dragon's eyes were closed. She wondered if Relpda were even conscious. She stood up again slowly. 'Well, at least we know what's wrong with her now. If we can get them out of her, clean her wounds, and seal them against the river water, maybe she'll have a chance.'

'We've cleaned away enough dirt. Let's get them off her,' Sylve decided.

Thymara stood with the circle of watchers, staring in sick fascination. As Leftrin stepped forward with his pot and brush, she turned aside. Ever since Sintara's blood had hit her face, it was all she could smell or taste. She had no desire to see more of it tonight. She saw Sintara waiting on the outskirts of the gathering, and pushed through the other onlookers to get to her dragon. 'I don't want to watch this,' she told her in a low voice. 'It was hard to see one snake removed from you, and you hadn't carried it long. I can't watch this.'

Sintara turned her head to regard her keeper. Her copper eyes whirled, and suddenly they appeared molten to Thymara, pools of liquid copper whirling against the gleaming backdrop of her lapis lazuli scales. Dragon glamour, she tried to

warn herself, but couldn't care. She let herself be drawn into that gaze, let herself become important because of the dragon's regard for her. A tiny cynical part of her snidely asked if a dragon's regard truly made her important. She ignored it.

'You should go hunting,' Sintara suggested to her.

She was reluctant to leave the dragon. Moving away from her glorious copper gaze would be like leaving the warmth of a cheery fire on a cold and stormy night. She clung to the dragon's gaze, refusing to believe her dragon might wish her to leave.

'I'm hungry,' Sintara said softly. 'Won't you go and find food for me?'

'Of course,' Thymara responded promptly, overcome by Sintara's will.

Sintara's voice grew very soft, as if it were no more than a breath blowing past Thymara's ear. 'Graft and Jerd went into the forest not so long ago. Perhaps they know where the hunting is good. Perhaps you should follow them.'

That stung. 'I am a better hunter than Graft will ever be,' she told her dragon. 'I've no need to follow him.'

'Nonetheless, I think you should,' Sintara insisted, and suddenly it did not seem like a bad idea. A thought teased at the edge of her mind; if Graft had already made a kill, perhaps she could help herself to a share, just as he had with hers. She still had not paid him back for that trespass.

'Go on,' Sintara urged her, and she went.

Each of the keepers had formed the habit of keeping their gear in their boats. Dealing with Rapskal's untidiness was a daily trial for Thymara. When she thought about it, it seemed unfair that a random choice on the first day had doomed her to be his partner. The others regularly rotated partners, but Rapskal had no interest in such swaps. And she doubted she would find anyone willing to take him on, even if she could

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persuade him to try it. He was handsome, and adept on the river. And always optimistic. She tried to recall him speaking crossly, and could not. She smiled to herself. So he was strange. It was a strangeness that she could get used to. She pushed his gear bag to one side and rummaged in her own for her hunting items.

Away from Sintara's gaze, it was easier to think about what she was doing and why. She recognized that the dragon had exerted some sort of glamour over her. Yet even being aware of it did not disperse it entirely. She had nothing more pressing to do, and certainly they could use the meat; they could always use the meat. The copper would benefit from a meal after they'd cleared the snakes off her, and certainly Mercor could do with some meat. But as she slung her bag over her shoulder, she wondered if she were merely trying to find a more acceptable reason to let herself follow the dragon's suggestion. She shrugged at the uselessness of wondering about it and set off for the forest eaves.

The shores of the Rain Wild River were never the same and never different. Some days, they passed ranks of needled and lacy fronded evergreens. The next day those dark green ranks might give way gradually to endless columns of white-trunked trees with reaching pale green leaves, and all their branches festooned with dangling vines and creepers heavy with late blossoms and ripening fruit. Today there was a wide and reedy bank, with ranks of rushes topped with tufts of fluffy seedheads. The bank was only silt and sand, temporary land that might vanish in the next flood. Beyond it and only slightly elevated above it a forest of grey-barked giants with wide-spreading branches chilled the earth with their eternal shade. Vines as thick as her waist dropped down from those spreading branches, creating an undergrowth as restrictive as the bars of a cage.

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It was easy enough to follow Gref't's trail through the marsh grasses. Water was already welling up in some places to fill his boot tracks. The prints of Jerd's bare feet were less visible. Thymara scarcely gave her mind to her tracking, thinking instead of the dragon. The more time and distance she acquired from Sintara, the clearer came her own thoughts. Why Sintara had sent her hunting was an easy question to answer; the dragon was always hungry. Thymara had intended to hunt today anyway; she did not mind her errand. More puzzling was why the dragon had suddenly decided to make the effort to charm her. She never had before. Did that mean that she now considered Thymara more important than she had previously?

A thought light as wafting bulrush down floated into her mind. 'Perhaps she could not use her glamour before. Perhaps she grows stronger in many ways, not just physically, as she challenges herself.'

She had whispered the words aloud. Was the thought hers, or had she, briefly, touched minds with one of the other dragons? That question was as disturbing as the thought itself. Was Sintara acquiring more of the powers that legends associated with dragons? Were the other dragons? And if so, how would they use them? Would their keepers be blinded by glammers, to become little more than fawning slaves?

'It doesn't work that way. It's more like a mother loves a wayward child.' Again she spoke the words aloud. She stopped, just beneath the eaves of the forest, and shook her head wildly, making her black braids whip against her neck. The small charms and beads that adorned them snapped against her neck. 'Stop it!' she hissed at whoever was invading her thoughts. 'Leave me alone.'

Not a wise choice, but the choice is yours, human.

And like a gauzy mantle lifting from her head and shoulders,

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the presence was gone. 'Who are you?' she demanded, but whoever it had been was gone. Mercor? She wondered. 'I should have asked that question first,' she muttered to herself as she entered the thick shade of the forest. In the dimmer light, Gref't's trail was not as easy to follow, but he had still left plenty of sign. And she had not gone far before she no longer needed to bother with tracking him. She heard his voice, his words indistinct, and then another voice in reply to his. Jerd, she thought to herself. They must be hunting together. She went more slowly and quietly, and then came to a complete halt.

Sintara had all but insisted she follow them. Why? She suddenly felt very awkward. How would it seem to them if she suddenly came up on them? What would Jerd think? Would Gref't see it as her admitting he was a better hunter than she was? She moved up into a tree and began to traverse from branch to branch. She was curious to see if he'd made a kill yet and if so, what he'd taken down, but had no desire for them to know she was there. Their voices came more clearly, a scattering of words. Jerd said she 'didn't understand' and there was anger in her voice. Gref't's voice was deeper and harder to follow. She heard him say, 'Jess isn't a bad man, even if he' and then his words were too soft to follow. She edged closer, thanking Sa for the black claws she dug into the slippery bark. She changed trees again, moving from one thick branch to another, and was suddenly looking down on Jerd and Gref't.

They weren't hunting. She doubted they had been hunting. It took a long moment for her mind to make sense of what her eyes saw. They were naked and lying next to one another on a blanket. Their discarded clothing was draped on nearby bushes. Gref't's scaling was blue and covered far more of his body than Thymara had ever suspected. He was turned away from her as he reclined. In the dim light of the forest, he

looked like a large lizard trying to find a sunning spot. What little light there was touched the long line of his hip and thigh down to his knee.

Jerd faced him. She lay on her belly, her chin propped on her elbows. Her bushy blonde hair was even more disorderly than usual. Gref't's hand was on her bare shoulder. Her body was long and slender, and the line of greenish scaling down her spine suddenly seemed beautiful to Thymara. It gleamed in the dim light, a rivulet of emerald shining down her back. Her legs were bent at the knee, and her heavily scaled calves and feet gently waved in the air as she replied to Gref't. 'How could you even suggest it? It is exactly the opposite of what we promised to do.'

He shrugged one naked shoulder, making the light move in a sapphire line on his back. 'I don't see it that way. No keeper claimed that dragon. No one is bonded to her. She's nearly dead. The other dragons can eat her when she dies and get some nourishment and a few memories. Dumb as that copper dragon is, chances are she doesn't have many memories at all. But, if we can persuade the dragons to let us have her carcass, or even part of it, Jess could turn it into some solid wealth that would benefit all of us.'

'But that's not—'

'Wait. Let me speak.' He set a finger to her lips to quench her protest. She bridled, turning her head away from his touch, but he only chuckled. Thymara, watching them, could not decide what was more shocking, their nakedness or the topic of their conversation. They could only have been doing one thing. One forbidden thing. But Jerd seemed irritated, almost angry with him, and yet she so casually stayed next to him. Gref't caught Jerd's jaw in his fingers, turned her face back to him. She bared her teeth at him and he laughed outright.

'You are such a child sometimes.'

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‘You didn’t treat me like a child a little while ago!’

‘I know.’ His hand moved down the side of her neck and he slipped it under her body. He was touching her breast. Jerd’s bared teeth changed to a very peculiar smile and she stretched, moving herself against Greft’s hand. Shock and a strange thrill ran through Thymara. Her breath caught in her throat. Was that what it was like? She had thought of sex as something that belonged only to adults, and only to those fortunate enough to have normal bodies. Now as she watched Jerd rub herself against Greft’s touch, a peculiar envy awoke in her. Jerd had obviously just taken this for herself. Or perhaps Greft had begun it, tricking her or forcing her? No. The look she was giving him now was all too knowing. An unsettling warmth was infusing Thymara’s own body. She couldn’t look away.

Greft seemed to have forgotten entirely that he had been speaking. Jerd suddenly wiggled aside from his touch and demanded, ‘You were saying? You were trying to justify selling dragon parts to the filthy Chalcedeans, I believe.’

He made a small noise in his throat, and then pulled his hand back to his side. His voice was husky when he spoke. ‘I was trying to explain that we will need money if my dream for us is to come true. I don’t really care where it comes from. I know where it won’t come from. Neither the Bingtown Traders nor the Rain Wild Traders will want to help us establish a town of our own. Both groups see us as abominations. They were glad to see us leave Trehaug and even gladder that we took the dragons with us. They don’t expect us to return; they don’t expect us to survive.

‘And if we do find Kelsingra do you think they’ll respect it as ours? No, Jerd. If we find Kelsingra and there are any Elderling artefacts left there, you can bet the Traders will claim them for themselves. I’ve seen Captain Leftrin at work,

charting the path we've taken. There's only one reason for him to do that. It's so that if we find something valuable, he can return to Trehaug and tell the Traders. And they'll know how to come back and find us and take it away from us. And we'll be on the outside again, the left-overs, the rejects. Even if all we find is a piece of land large enough for dragons to survive on, we won't be safe. How long have the Traders been looking for arable land? Even that they would take from us. So we have to think ahead. We all know that Cassarick and Trehaug depend on outside trade for survival. They dig up Elderling treasure and sell it through the Bingtown Traders. They can't feed themselves. Without Elderling stuff to sell, it would all have fallen apart years ago. But what will we have? Nothing. Maybe, if we find solid ground, we can build something for ourselves and our children. But even if all we plan to do is grow crops, we'll still need seed and tools. We'll need to build homes for ourselves. And we'll need money, solid coin, to buy what we need.'

Thymara's head was whirling. Was Grefth was speaking of a town for the keepers and their dragons? A future for them, a future separate from Trehaug or Cassarick? A future with children. With husbands, wives? It was unthinkable, unimaginable. Without consciously making the decision, she stretched out flat on the tree limb and wormed her way closer.

'It won't work,' Jerd responded scornfully. 'Any townsite you find will be too far up the river. And who would trade with us?'

'Jerd, you are such a child sometimes! Now wait, don't glare at me. It's not your fault. You've never known anything but the Rain Wilds. I myself have only ventured out once or twice, but at least I've read of what the outside world is like. And the hunter is an educated man. He has ideas, Jerd, and he sees things so clearly. When he talks, everything just makes so much

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sense. I always knew that there had to be a way to have a different life, but I just couldn't see it. Jess says it was because for so long I'd been told what the rules were that I couldn't see they were just rules made by men. And if men can make rules, then other men can change them. *We* can change them. We don't have to be bound by the "way things have always been". We can break out of it, if we just have the courage.

'Look how we are with the dragons. They remember how the world was, back when they dominated, and they think that's how it's going to be again. But we don't have to give them that power. None of the dragons need to have that dragon's body when it dies. It's just meat to them, and we've given them plenty of meat. So, in a sense, they owe it to us, especially when you think what it could mean to us. With the kind of wealth we could get for the dragon's corpse, we could make a foundation for a better life for all of us, including the other dragons! If we have the courage to change the rules and do what is best for us for a change.' Thymara could almost see Gref't's imagination soaring on what could be. The grim smile on his face promised triumph over old humiliations and wrongs. 'Jess says that if you have money, anyone will trade with you. And if, from time to time, we have rare merchandise, unique merchandise that no one else anywhere can get, then there will always be people willing to come to you, no matter the difficulties. They'll come, and they'll meet your price.'

Jerd had rolled slightly to face him. In the dimness, the touches of silver in her eyes gleamed more sharply. She looked uneasy. 'Wait. Are you talking about selling dragon body parts again? Not just now, maybe, if the copper dies, but in the future? That's just wrong, Gref't. What if I were talking about selling your blood or bone? What if the dragons were thinking of raising your children for meat?'

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‘It won’t be like that! It doesn’t have to be like that. You’re thinking of this in the worst possible way.’ His hand came back, gentle, soothing. He traced her arm from shoulder to elbow and back again. Then his touch slipped to her neck and his hand wandered slowly down her ribcage. Thymara saw her breasts move with her indrawn breath. ‘The dragons will come to understand. A few scales, a bit of blood, the tip of a claw. Nothing that harms them. Sometimes but not often, something more than that, a tooth perhaps or an eye, taken from a dragon that will die anyway . . . Never often, or what is rare becomes commonplace. That would do no one any good.’

‘I don’t like it.’ She spoke flatly and pulled away from his exploring hand. ‘And I don’t think any of the dragons will like it. How about Kalo? Have you shared your plan with your own dragon? How did he take it?’

He shrugged, and then admitted, ‘He didn’t like it. Said he would kill me before he allowed that to happen. But he threatens to kill me several times a day. It’s just what he says when things don’t go his way. He knows he has the best keeper. So, he threatens me but he puts up with me. In time, I think even he would see the wisdom of the idea.’

‘I don’t. I think he’d kill you.’ Her voice was flat. She meant it. She stretched as she spoke and then glancing down at her own breasts, brushed at her left nipple as if dislodging something. Gref’t eyes followed her hand, and his voice went deeper.

‘Maybe it won’t ever come to that,’ he conceded. ‘Maybe we will find Kelsingra and maybe it will be rich with Elderling artefacts. If we do find our fortune there, then we must be sure that all recognize it is *ours*. Trehaug will try to claim it; be sure of that. Bingtown will want to be the sole marketplace for it. We’ll hear it all again from them. “This is the

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way it has always been.” But you and I, we know it doesn’t always have to be that way. We must be very ready to defend our future from grasping hands.’

Jerd pushed blonde hair back from her face. ‘Graft, you spin such wonderful webs of dreams. You speak as if we were hundreds of people in search of a haven, instead of just over a dozen. “Defend our future” you say. What future? There are too few of us. The best we can think of would be finding a better life just for ourselves. I like how you think, most of the time, with your talk of new rules for a new life. But sometimes you sound like a little child playing with wooden toys and claiming them as your kingdom.’

‘Is that wrong? That I’d like to be a king?’ He cocked his head at her and smiled his tight-lipped smile. ‘A king might need a queen.’

She sounded scornful of him as she told him sternly, ‘You will never be a king.’ But her deprecation of him was a lie, her hands said. Thymara watched in amazement as Jerd caught Graft’s shoulders in both her hands, twisted onto her back and then drew him down on top of her. ‘Enough talk,’ she announced. One of her hands moved to the back of Graft’s neck. She pulled his face down to hers.

Thymara watched.

She didn’t mean to. There was no moment when she decided to stay. Instead, her claws dug deep into bark and held her there. Her brow furrowed and she stared, heedless of the biting insects that found her and hummed around her.

She had seen animals mate, a male bird mounting a female. With a flutter and a shudder, it was soon done and sometimes the female scarcely seemed to notice it. Her parents had never spoken to her of mating, for it was forbidden to her and to those like her. Any curiosity about it had been firmly discouraged. Even her beloved father had warned her, ‘You may

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encounter men who will try to take advantage of you, well knowing that what they seek is forbidden. Trust no man who tries to do more than touch your hand in greeting. Leave his company at once, and tell me of it.'

And she had believed him. He was her father, with her best interests at heart. No one would make a marriage offer for her. Everyone knew that if those the Rain Wilds touched heavily had children, the children were born either completely monstrous or not viable at all. It made no sense for such as her to mate. The food she would eat during a pregnancy while she was unable to hunt or gather, the difficulty her body would endure in bringing forth a child that would most likely die . . . no. Resources in the Rain Wilds were always scarce, life was always difficult. No one had a right to consume and not produce. It was not the Trader way.

Except that her father had broken that rule. He'd taken a chance on her, taken a chance that she would pull her own weight. And she had. So perhaps the rules were not always right . . . Was Gref't right? Could it be that any rules that men made, other men could change? Were the rules not so absolute as she has always believed them?

The couple below her didn't seem to be thinking of the rules at all. It also seemed to be taking them substantially longer than when birds mated. They made sounds, small sounds of approval that sent shivers up Thymara's back. When Jerd arched her back and Gref't put lingering kisses on her breasts, Thymara's whole body reacted in a way that embarrassed and astonished her. Light flowed in glittering waves on the scaled bodies that moved in rhythm. Gref't pounded his body against Jerd's in a way that looked punishing, but the woman below him only writhed and then suddenly gripped his buttocks and pulled him tight and still against her. She gave a muffled moan.

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An instant later, Grefth collapsed upon her. For a long time, they sprawled there. Grefth's heaving breath gradually calmed. He raised his head and lifted himself slightly from her body. A moment later, Jerd reached a lazy hand to push her sweaty strands of hair from her eyes. A slow smile spread across her face as she looked up at him. Then her eyes widened, and suddenly her gaze shot past Grefth and met Thymara's stare. She gave a shriek and snatched uselessly at her discarded clothes.

'What is it?' Grefth demanded, rolling off her and turning his gaze skyward. But by then, Thymara was two trees away and moving fast. She leapt from branch to branch, scurrying like a lizard. Behind her, she heard Jerd's voice raised in an angry complaint, and then Grefth's laughter scalded her. 'Probably the most she'll ever dare to do is watch,' he said in a carrying voice, and she knew that he meant her to hear the words. Tears stung her eyes and her heart hammered against her ribs as she fled.

Sedric stood alone on the deck of the Tarman. He gazed towards the shore. There was no sign that anyone intended to travel today. Instead, Leftrin was hurrying about with a steaming bucket, doing some sort of doctoring on the dragons. It made Sedric anxious to see that the major gathering of people and dragons was now clustered around the prone copper dragon. It wasn't his fault. The animal had been sick when he first visited it. Uneasily he wondered if he had left any sign of his passage there. He hadn't meant to hurt it, only to take what he so desperately needed. 'I'm sorry,' he said quietly, not sure to whom he apologized. Leftrin joined the keepers clustered around the prone dragon. He could not see what they were doing now. Was it dead? Keepers and other dragons formed a wall. What were they doing down there?

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Sedric gave a sudden low cry and curled forward over his belly. Terrible tearing cramps uncoiled inside him. He sank to his knees, then fell over on his side. The pain was such that he couldn't even call for help. It wouldn't have done him any good anyway. Everyone else had gone ashore to help with the dragons. His bowels were being torn from his body. He clutched at his gut but could not shield himself from the agony. He closed his eyes as the world seemed to swirl around him and abruptly surrendered his consciousness.

*Day the 7th of the Prayer Moon
Year the 6th of the Independent Alliance of Traders*

*From Detozi, Keeper of the Birds, Trehaug to Ereĳ, Keeper of the
Birds, Bingtown*

*Dispatched today, three birds bearing wedding invitations from the
family of Trader Delfin. Enclosed, a list of the intended recipients in
Bingtown. If any bird fail, please see that a duplicate of the invita-
tion is still delivered to each addressee.*

*As the wedding is to be celebrated soon, promptness in delivery is
essential.*

Ereĳ,

*Be certain these invitations reach their destinations promptly, or I fear the
families will be invited to celebrate the child's birth before they have time to
arrive for the wedding! Customs are not observed in Trehaug as they once
were. Some blame it on the Tattooed, but this couple is Rain Wild born
and bred!*

Detozi