

DRAGON SPACE

Two Novels of the Star Rigger Universe

Dragons in the Stars
and
Dragon Rigger

(excerpts)

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Jeffrey A. Carver

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A portion of this work appeared in substantially different form as the novelette "Though All the Mountains Lie Between," first published in the *Science Fiction Times*, and the anthology *Dragons of Darkness*, copyright © 1980 by Jeffrey Carver.

Print editions published by Tor Books (Tom Doherty Associates, Inc.)
Edited by James Frenkel for Tor Books
First print editions: 1992, 1993

A Starstream Publications Ebook,
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DRAGONS IN THE STARS

(excerpt)

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Jeffrey A. Carver

Prologue: The Words

In the annals of starship rigging, it is said that the story began in a realm far from the paths of human thought. . . .

SKYTOUCH?

There was no answer to the dragon's whisper. The crystalline draconae lay broken at his feet, but a tingle in the dragon's mind told him she was not gone, not yet.

"Skytouch," he hissed again, venting smoke from his massive nostrils. Those who had knocked her from the sky lay torn in pieces, just beyond the ridge. He had answered her cry in time to avenge her, but not in time to save her.

"Highwing," whispered a voice to his left. "Stay your grief! You must listen!"

He swung his massive head in anger. "Iffling! Are you here to view the dead? Leave us in peace!"

"Highwing," answered the shimmering being, "your quarrel is not with me. Will you not accept my help?"

Highwing blew fire over the iffling's head. The creature floated out of the way, unperturbed. "If you want to help, then show me who encouraged those . . . *ungarkkondoh* . . . to do this."

"They were followers of one whom we do not name," whispered the iffling. "They meant to instill fear. You must not let them succeed. You must listen."

Highwing ignored the meddlesome being. What did its words matter? His mate lay dying, victim of a senseless, savage attack. She had come from the Dream Mountain to sing the memories of the realm; but some, it seemed, no longer approved of such stories, though the telling of them was an almost sacred function of the draconae. Those *ungarkkondoh* had deserved far worse than the death he had given them in punishment. But it was he who would suffer now. *Skytouch, why did I not stay with you?*

"Listen to her!" urged the iffling. "Listen while you can!"

Highwing did not answer. As he gazed down at her broken crystal wings, beautiful even in the fading twilight, his eyes filled with memories of Skytouch under a noonday sun: wings of gossamer crystal riding the wind, eyes ablaze, her flight-song gladdening the air. Now her eyes were nearly extinguished. Listen to her? He reached out in thought. *Skytouch?*

Her left eye glimmered faintly. He tilted his head, narrowed his gaze to peer into the interior of her eye. Deep within its facets a fire still burned, though faintly. *Skytouch*, he whispered with his mind. *Can you hear me?*

There was a golden flash in the center of his vision, and an image danced in his eye: the two of them on wing, riding midday thermals. He sensed laughter, through the pain. But he could not return her laughter, not now. *I wish I could take you back there*, he thought. *Or to the Dream Mountain.* To the draconae, to the other females.

L-i-s-t-e-n . . .

He was astonished to hear her voice in his mind. Skytouch—

L-i-s-t-e-n . . . t-o . . . t-h-e . . . W-o-r-d-s.

His gaze penetrated deeper into the dying coals of her eyes, into the pain, sharing it. Listen to the Words? Now?

Her mind-voice strained to be heard. *Y-o-u . . . Y-O-U . . . m-u-s-t . . . r-e-m-e-m-b-e-r . . .* And before he could do more than quiver in surprise, another memory grew bright in his thoughts.

It was a bowl-shaped dell. The fledglings crouched, listening to the elder dracona sing of events past, and of events yet to unfold. The fledglings stirred impatiently as the elder's shining eyes turned to a tiny, jeweled glass dracona named Skytouch. "Daughter, speak the Words of the future."

The young female rose, tinkling. Gazing into the sky, she sang in a crystalline voice:

*From beyond life
will come one
From beyond hope
will come one
Without friend
will come one
And the realm shall tremble.*

*Innocent of our ways
will come one
Challenging darkness
will come one
Speaking her name
will come one
And the realm shall tremble.*

*From that one
comes a beginning
From that one
comes an ending
From that one
all paths diverge
And surely the realm shall tremble.*

The vision darkened, Skytouch's strength ebbing.

Highwing rumbled in wonder. He remembered the time. It was his first sight, as a youngling, of Skytouch. There had been more words than that, words of warning, of admonition. Prophecies of demons entering the realm, of innocence challenging darkness. Of deeds that might come to pass. Of the need for wisdom, the need to discern what is or is not garkkondoh. Words of little meaning to him then, or now.

He blinked slowly, so as not to break the weakening bond with his mate. There was little light left in her now. Why had Skytouch wanted him to see that memory? He was no dracona.

She seemed, even in the growing darkness of her thoughts, to be aware of his question. *Y-o-u . . .*

Skytouch?

. . . m-u-s-t . . . r-e-m-e-m-b-e-r . . .

He breathed smoke. Yes. For you. But why?

Her fires were failing rapidly. But a spark flickered in her eye and one more image appeared in his thoughts. He recognized himself, flying high in a night sky. There was danger in the image: someone there, someone not of the realm. He imagined that he felt the mountains trembling. Speak not of this, but hold it close to your heart, he seemed to hear her say.

What is it? he whispered. But the image was fading. *Skytouch? Wait!*

Be wise, son of Strongwing. Be wise . . .

He seemed to hear her last words chiming on the air. The connection was cold. Her eyes were dark now, the last spark gone. She had fled to the Final Dream Mountain. The glass shards of the vessel that had held her in life were now empty. *Skytouch*, he whispered, *call to me and I shall hear you wherever I may be, though all of the mountains lie between us.*

There was no answer.

He raised his head. Even the iffling was gone.

Highwing tipped back his head and roared into the night sky. He lit the sky with a thundering flame. What had she been trying to convey? What duty? He would not learn it here, not now.

Wings unfurled, he leaped into the air in fury and grief. Her death would be repaid—not now, perhaps, but one day. He would keep her thoughts in his heart, though he didn't understand them. He would ponder them and learn. One day he would understand.

For now, bewildered and alone, he could only beat his way into the cold stinging wind, high into the deepening night sky.

**PART ONE:
RIGGER**

. . . In those early days, long before the founding of the RiggerGuild, starship riggers lived with constant insecurity. Often enough, they found themselves controlled by shrewd masters—sometimes subtly, sometimes not—but controlled nonetheless; and in those days, riggers were rarely successful in supporting one another against abusive masters. But if they suffered oppression in the normal world, they found freedom in the net, in the dreams by which they steered their ships, which their masters, however powerful, could never share. The lucky rigger found a way to carry that freedom out of the net, to the other side of life. . . .

Jona' Jon'

—Gazing into Yesteryear:

A Brief History of Starflight

Chapter 1

Gaston's Landing

Jael PAUSED at the edge of the spaceport lobby, heart pounding. She was late for the afternoon spacing call, and she could see from where she stood that today her name would go to the bottom of a very long list. The spaceport was crowded, noisy, clotted with people competing for space, for time, for service—shippers, stewards, unrated crew, normal-space pilots, riggers. Loud voices echoed across the room, voices of the stewards calling riggers for possible assignment. The calls seemed to float over the lounge area where the riggers congregated—riggers for hire, too many of them—all hoping that the stewards would come to them, match them with ship masters, ask them to fly.

Jael drew a breath, and almost turned away, but forced herself to remain. She was ready—more than ready—for an assignment. She had the schooling and the space-trial credentials, and she looked presentable: a slender, dark-haired young woman, not beautiful maybe, but neatly groomed, in a tunic suit, grey edged with scarlet. Did she have the stomach for the disappointment that was almost sure to come? She surveyed the lobby, considering. Her eyes widened as she glimpsed a young rigger of her acquaintance, Toni Gilen, threading her way across the lobby toward a steward. Jael shook her head and strode in. Toni was one of the shyest riggers Jael knew; if Toni could be assertive, surely Jael could be.

She felt no particular hope; she felt only the need that drew her here. It was the same feeling that drove all riggers: the almost irresistible need to shape, to explore, to live the fantastic realities of a realm that nonriggers could never touch or master, but could only dream of. And she sensed the ubiquitous conflicting emotion, almost palpable in the air. It was fear: fear of failure, fear of the shippers whom the riggers hoped to serve. She felt the need and fear combine like a thrill in her gut, her groin, her spine; but beneath it all, somewhere, remained the hope that today might be the day she would contract to fly.

She walked past the waiting area, toward the registry window, her feet moving quickly on the tile floor.

"Hi there, Jaelie!" she heard, and despite herself, she turned. A hawk-nosed young man was laughing from within the railing that set off the rigger lounge. "Gonna show us how to cheat the odds today?" Jael opened her mouth to reply, but the young man was already strutting away, grinning.

Burning with anger, Jael stalked on. Riggers, she thought bitterly. They were such misfits, most of them. Self-centered, insecure, social incompetents. Walking raw nerves, in a world none of them was suited for. Was she like them? She hoped not. And yet, these were the people who navigated spaceships through the slippery mists of the Flux; it was their unique gifts of vision that made travel among the stars possible. Jael was proud to be a rigger. But she was not always proud of the company she had to keep.

She approached the registration window nervously. She was always aware of her youth and her relative inexperience, but among the spaceport officials and shipowners, she felt even tinier and more vulnerable than she really was. A raggedly bearded unrated crewman brushed by her and winked, grinning lewdly. She ignored the gesture, or tried to. She hated this place and those who worked here, always ready to prey on the weak and the uncertain. But if she wanted to return to space, she had to do it from here. And more than anything in the world, she wanted to return to space. To the net. To the vision. To the freedom.

A young man was ahead of her at the registration window, talking in a croak, a rasping whisper. Jael waited, fidgeting, until he left and it was her turn at the window. A middle-aged woman with bluish hair spoke without looking up. "ID?"

Jael touched her bracelet to the dull-surfaced eye of the reader. "Jael LeBrae."

"Didn't ask your name, honey. It's right here in front of me." The woman turned, touched something on her console. "Jael LeBrae," she said, reading the output. "Available for single Class Three or multiple Class Five. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

The woman looked up, pursing her lips. "You the daughter of Willie LeBrae?" Her eyes bored into Jael's.

"Yes." The familiar tightness took hold in her throat. Was the woman going to ask about her father? She didn't want to talk about it, about him.

"I see. Well, nothing right now. Do you want to wait?"

Jael hesitated, struggling not to resent the indifference in the woman's voice. "Are you expecting anything?" she asked finally.

The woman looked at her in surprise. "Why, how would I know, honey? We hear about them when they come in. If you want to wait, you can wait. Is that what you want to do?"

Jael stared at her without answering. Could she stand it? It was the one way, the only way. "Yes," she whispered.

"Fine. Now, make way for others, won't you?"

Jael walked away from the window and joined the other riggers in the lounge. As she glanced back, she saw that there was no one in line behind her.

* * *

There were no empty seats in the quiet area, so she stood near the wall watching some of the riggers playing board and tank games, until a bench space opened up. As she slid into the empty seat, the young man to her right moved a few inches farther away. Jael tried not to let her resentment show. She was tired of being blamed for her father, for people and events over which she had no control.

But there were ways of dealing with emotional discomfort, and Jael used one of them now. She sat perfectly still, her back and neck erect, balanced. Closing her eyes halfway, she slowly erased the visual input from her consciousness. She let her inner mind see, without her eyes.

She was aware, with her inner eye, of the expressions borne on the faces of the riggers waiting in this place. Boredom. Nervous tension. Desire. Inward-turned senses. Outward eagerness that belied the darker feelings roiling within. She smelled the aura of hot fear and desire that marked a roomful of riggers, the way musky body scents marked the dens of animals. These riggers came from dens all over the continent to this spaceport: to wait in this lounge, to hope, to need and dread the chance to take a starship into space.

But Jael didn't want to think about them now, didn't want to think about the competition. She had better things to dwell upon: memories that gave her a shiver as her thoughts fled from the here and now. As they fled into the past, to the time of her first flight, not so very long ago—a training flight, the first of four . . .

She had been working with other riggers, but it had been different then—not the bitter competition she faced now. Riggers depended upon one another in guiding their ships through the currents, through the reefs and shoals of flight. It was by navigating the Flux—an other-dimensional realm of mystery and imagination—that starships physically passed among the stars. And in steering their ships, riggers had to work together, not just cooperatively as would the crew of any ship, but as artists meshed in psychic union. Joined by shared intuition and inner vision, melded in working unity, they steered their vessels. In the schools it was difficult and challenging, flying simulations from the libraries, navigating any of a thousand actual and imagined courses. In space it was doubly challenging, because it was real, and life was at stake—and in the conquest of the challenge, it was infinitely more rewarding than any simulation.

On that first flight and those that followed, Jael had left it all behind: the fears and needs, the

problems of life back on the world, the family, the business, the reputation. All that disappeared when she entered the rigger's net and wove together the threads of real space, of the Flux, of her imagination . . . and crafted of it a world so cunningly real that the spaceship slipped through it as surely as it passed through the vacuum and weightlessness of normal-space. On that first flight, she and her crewmates had carried the ship through a magical undersea realm of tropical waters, warm and crystalline blue. And where were those crewmates, her fellow students, now? All gone, off among the stars . . .

"Listen up, people, I have some new openings here!"

For an instant, she wasn't sure whether the voice had come from her memory or from the outside. She widened her eyes, brought them into focus. A shop steward was standing in the center of the lobby, job slate in hand. He was calling out positions to be filled.

Jael shook herself to alertness and listened.

" . . . a two-rigger crew to make a fast run up through Aeregia Minor, with calls at Parvis III and Chaening's Outpost. We need a four-rigger crew for assignment with a passenger-carrying line; you'll have to go through the complete screening and testing on that one. And we have two seats for single-rigger jobs, one freight and one courier." The steward paused and looked around at the attentive, brooding faces. "Don't crowd, and don't apply if you're not qualified," he concluded, then turned and disappeared into the office.

Jael rose, along with at least half the riggers in the room. There was some crowding and jockeying for position at the half dozen ID readers, then she was in line. The woman ahead of her glanced back skeptically, but shrugged and said nothing. Frowning, Jael remained intentionally oblivious to any other glances, until her turn came to slide her ID bracelet into the reader niche. She drummed her fingers, waiting.

The screen blinked and displayed:

We're sorry. We cannot consider your application for any presently available position.

Jael stared at the words. For three months now, since her last flight, she had received nothing but rejections. It would have been one thing to lose out on positions if she'd been unqualified, but she was consistently being denied even the chance to prove herself.

"Hey, are you going to stand there all day?" complained a voice behind her. Turning, Jael focused her frown upon the voice's owner. "What'd you expect, anyway?" the complaining woman muttered sarcastically. "Why don't you try the other side? That's where you belong, isn't it?"

I don't know—what *did* I expect? Jael thought, turning away. Fair treatment? I don't know why. She returned to her seat with as much dignity as she could muster. A young man she recognized from rigger school kept looking in her direction; she did not return the gaze. But the anger kept bubbling back up. *Why don't you try the other side?* The thought made her tremble. The other side of the spaceport lobby was where the unregulated shippers hired riggers—riggers so untamable or unfit for society, or so desperate, that they would fly with virtually no legal protection, not even the minimal restrictions imposed on the registered shippers. It was there that her father had hired his crews. It was there that the family name had been turned from a name of pride to a name of derision. Never, she vowed.

But other words echoed in her mind, words she had heard someone mutter behind her back more than once: "*Who the hell wants to hire a daughter of Willie LeBrae?*" She hadn't responded to the comment; she never did. But that didn't stop it from hurting.

And that was the worst of it, really. Her fellow riggers, if anyone, ought to understand, ought to sympathize. Most of them knew the pain of rejection well enough. But it was as though they only knew how to cut deeper, how to make a wound hurt even more. There were those, of

course, who just sat there, lost in their own worlds, neither harming nor helping. They barely stirred even to answer the calls; they were hardly going to rise to anyone's defense. And then there were her schoolmates—those whose trust she had gained anyway—but they were scattered like dust now, among the stars.

Jael *was* going to fly again, and join her friends out there; of that she was determined. Sooner or later they would have to give her a berth.

If she had to wait here forever.

* * *

The next few hours felt like forever. There was only one other call, and that for a single passenger-rated rigger, for which she was unqualified. She got up and went to the lunch counter and bought a cup of leek chowder, the only thing they sold that was any good; and she stood at the edge of the lounge, spooning chowder into her mouth, tasting the thick pasty sauce and the chunks of spud-vine and leek. By the time she'd scraped the little bowl clean and licked off the spoon, she'd decided that enough was enough for one day.

With a last tentative gaze over the lounge—as though one more call might come, as though waiting just a few moments more might make the difference—she trudged toward the door. And with a final dark glance across the lobby toward the unregulated area, she strode out into the late afternoon sun. A tremendous oppression seemed to lift from her shoulders as she left the spaceport building—not the weight of her unfulfilled dream, because that never lifted, but the weight of the enduring and the silent frustration. It was a burden she was willing to bear, because she had to for the sake of her dream; but it felt good to put it down for a while.

The road home to the multidorm wound up through the hills. It was a fine, crisp day—a good day for walking, for shouting at the wind, for sighing under the consoling caress of the sun.

"Jael!" The voice was behind her.

She paused and turned, blinking, only half-focusing. Her mind was still in the sky.

A figure was striding up the hill toward her. "Jael, how are you?" It was a dark-haired young man with striking silver eyebrows, waving a hand, trying to get her attention. "Ho, Jael! Are you in there? Anybody home?"

Slowly her inner concentration melted away. "Dap—hi!" she said, smiling slowly. "I didn't expect to see *you*. When did you get in?" Dap was her cousin, also a rigger—and one of the few people still based here on Gaston's Landing whose presence could bring a smile to her lips. Last she'd heard, he'd been out on a long flight.

"I just got in a few days ago," Dap said, falling in alongside her. "You walking up to the rigger hall?" He pointed up the road.

Jael nodded, resuming her stride. "A few days? I haven't seen you."

Dap shrugged. "I've been lying low since I got back. Wanted to be by myself for a while." As they walked together, he broke into a grin. "How have you been? It was really some flight, Jael. I didn't want to wreck the memory by coming in here right away and facing all that." He waved back toward the spaceport.

"That's great," Jael said softly, and felt a twinge of guilt. This was her cousin, and she wanted to share his excitement, but just now it was rather hard.

"You look a little down in the mouth there," Dap said. "What's the matter?"

"What isn't?" she growled, and instantly regretted her tone.

Dap chuckled. If anyone else had laughed, she would have wanted to murder him. With Dap, she was willing to forgive. "You think it's funny?" she said finally.

He nudged her with an elbow. "Naw. You know I don't think that. But are things really so bad?"

She shrugged and kept walking. "I can't get work. That's pretty bad, isn't it?"

"I know what you mean," Dap said. "But we all have trouble with that at some time or other. When you only have a few qualifying flights under your belt, it's tough to break in."

"It's not that. I've had two paying flights. It's not just breaking in."

Her cousin looked puzzled. "Then what—"

"It's that they *won't* give it to me. They don't *want* me. They're keeping me out."

Dap frowned. "You mean, because of your father's—?"

"Of course! What am I supposed to do? Change my name? Move to another planet? How can I do that if they won't let me fly?" She blinked back a tear, and had to steel herself to keep from crying. She couldn't help what people thought, but she didn't have to let herself be affected by it. And she didn't mean to wreck Dap's day too.

Dap grunted. They walked up the road, their feet crunching on the loose gravel. After a while, the movement began to dispel her gloom, and she asked, "So how was it? Your flight, I mean?"

A smile tugged suddenly at the corner of Dap's mouth. "Beautiful. Just beautiful." He turned suddenly. "Would you like to share it with me?"

She was startled. "What do you mean?"

"Dreamlink, Jael. There's a machine at my dad's friend's cottage. We could go there right now, and instead of my telling you about it . . ." Dap grinned and caught her hand. "It might lift you a little, Jael, to relive it with me. Taste it, feel it, smell it, see it. Jael, it was wonderful!"

Jael tensed with desire and fear. She felt Dap's hand release hers as she looked at him, looked into his intense, earnest eyes, dark under those silvery brows. "Well, I . . . I don't know,"

"Jael, have you ever been in the dreamlink? It's as close to rigging as you can come without being—"

"Yes, I know." She blinked her gaze away, embarrassed. "But it's awfully . . . personal, Dap, I mean, it's not like we're . . . I mean, we're cousins. We're not—" She'd heard how some riggers used the dreamlink during their off time. It made a very interesting enhancement for lovers. Or so she had been told.

"Hey—*hey!* Jael, it's not like that." Dap laughed gently and touched her arm, "Jael, don't worry—it's not sexual, if that's what you're thinking of." Now he looked embarrassed. "Or anything like that. I mean, sure it can be, but it doesn't have to be. It's just a way of sharing thoughts and memories and feelings and . . ." He hesitated, and shrugged.

She trembled, avoiding his eyes. This was Dap she was talking to, her cousin, her friend. What was she afraid of? Didn't she want the chance of feeling what he'd felt as he took wing between the stars? "I—" She felt her mind churning, her feelings turning over and over. Perhaps she should; at least it would give her a taste of what she'd been yearning for. At least it would be with a friend.

"Jael," he said, "well be looking right into one another, and our souls will link—"

"Okay," she sighed, interrupting him. She nodded and murmured huskily, "Okay, let's go."

Chapter 2

The Dreamlink

THEY DROVE in a groundcar from the rigger hall, gliding along the roadway. They passed around the far side of the hills, into a gorgeous pink sunset—with two of Gascon's Landing's three moons just hanging there, slim crescents shining in the reddish glowing sky. They drove to Dap's father's friend's cottage, where the dreamlink machine was located.

Jael felt a rush of nervousness as they got out to walk up a short path to the retreat. It was a real house, not a multi-dorm. Dap touched her arm, smiling reassuringly. The gesture helped her to overcome her doubts; she drew a breath and accompanied him to the front door. Dap fumbled in his pocket and fished out a slim metal wafer and slid it into a slot in the edge of the door. "The Donovons don't believe in ID bracelets—you have to use a key," he murmured. The door clicked and swung inward on hinges. Jael followed him in.

She peered around the front room as Dap secured the door. The house was small but elegantly designed, with a curving wooden staircase and soft-textured beige and white walls. Jael strolled around, touching the wall surfaces and banisters with a certain fascination. Perhaps it was a consequence of living in the rigger halls too long; it startled her to encounter luxury.

"Back here, Jael."

She followed Dap into a small sitting room, in the center of which was a silver-hemisphered device standing waist high. Dap passed his hand over the device, and it came on, producing a golden light. She'd never actually seen a dreamlink machine before, but she knew what it was: a specialized type of synaptic augmentor. It should be no big deal, compared to a rigger-net. As she approached it, she felt a soft inner glow pass through her. It seemed to match the light that the hemisphere produced. The feeling stayed with her as she crossed the room to where Dap was moving a pair of seats into the fringe of the glowing field. "We'll let it coalesce for a few minutes. Would you like something to drink?" he asked. "Some sparkly?"

Jael nodded. She sat and tried to relax while Dap disappeared into the kitchen; she smiled, drumming her fingers, and murmured thanks when he returned with two slender glasses of carbonated water. She inhaled a faint scent of juniper and lime; it tickled her nose and throat as she sipped it. Dap took the other seat and clinked glasses with her.

"What do we do now? What's going to happen?" she asked, thinking, this is your cousin, good old Dap—why are you worried?—he knows what he's doing.

Dap leaned forward and winked teasingly. She wondered if he was amused by her naivete, or perhaps being just the slightest bit flirtatious. She blushed and took another sip of sparkly. "You'll know what to do," Dap said. "If you can handle the net, you'll have no trouble with this." He settled back into his seat looking relaxed and eager, and Jael thought, I'm worrying about nothing after all. Nothing. The field was growing in intensity, very slowly, a pleasant glow surrounding her mind.

Dap began to talk, just idle conversation about this and that, riggers and family—his, fortunately, not hers (they were actually second cousins, and she knew his parents and sister only slightly)—and all the while, she felt the glow sinking deeper into her mind, warming her, almost a physical sensation that tingled at the edges of the iciness that lingered inside her. She shivered as Dap suddenly shifted tracks and described his last flight—a three star-system hop, fast and exciting—played in the net as skipping-stone islands across a broad, sun-spanked sea. His eyes sought hers as he spoke, laughing. "Jael, it was just the two of us, Deira and me. The owner was going to come, but canceled out at the last minute. No owner, just the two of us, captaining ourselves, and crafting this vision!"

As he spoke, Jael began to see a glimmer of the vision Dap had held during the flight—just a glimpse at the edge of her own vision, dancing like spots before her eyes as his memories were

spun out in a tapestry of words and expression. His words tugged at her as he spoke of the intimacy he had experienced in the teamwork with Deira, as they'd piloted their star freighter through the Flux. "Jael, that was the best part about the trip," he said, his eyes still seeking hers, holding them just a little longer than she wished them held, his thoughts reaching out to hers. "But it was fleeting." And his voice turned a little wistful. "She's already gone out on another flight, this time on a long haul with three others. I miss her already." Did his voice catch, just a little? He kept talking. "But the experience . . ." And sparks of excitement seemed to radiate from his voice as he spoke again of the flight itself. "Imagine an absolutely clear, deep sea and an enormous, beautiful sky and a series of islands laid out like jewels on the sea . . ."

Something in Jael knotted up as he went on, causing her to choke silently. She tried to contain it; she didn't want to let her envy show. But as the warmth of the field worked its way slowly through the remaining iciness inside her, she felt certain feelings of resistance giving way, and she realized that there was no need to hide her feelings from her friend. That was what the dreamlink was all about—wasn't it?—tugging loose feelings, sharing them. As she looked at Dap, she felt a gentle release of something within, and she no longer only heard his words . . .

Dap's vision of space . . . the space *he* had flown . . . blossomed open directly in her mind. The glowing blue sea, and the space freighter leaping over and through that image of a sea like a magnificent dolphin, plunging through the clear waters and the air alike, plunging through—or rather, *around*—the light-years of normal-space distance as a dolphin plunged through the sea. And she glimpsed the woman Dap had rigged with, Deira, and his attraction and growing intimacy with her. She felt his exultation, the feeling of release and freedom that came from steering a ship through the Flux. She'd felt that herself, those few times she'd flown, but never with the kind of intimacy that Dap was showing her in this memory.

Jael shivered with envy, and with nervousness, because she sensed in Dap a sly querying interest toward her now. But he had assured her that his interest was only friendly, that he would never push her into anything she didn't want. She could trust him, she had to trust at least someone in this world, and what was she so afraid of, anyway?

Deira and I . . . we shared this vision, and more. Can you see, Jael? Can you feel it?

As she sensed Dap's thoughts, feelings stirred in her heart that she could no longer control. Yes, she felt it, and she did not want to know such envy, but she couldn't help it. Before she knew what was happening, thoughts and images began to gush up out of her own mind like water from a fountain. They spilled out into the image of space, into the dreamlink . . .

First came memories of her own training flights, dancing down the lanes of nearby space, among some of the cluster-mate stars of the sun of Gaston's Landing. It was sheer joy, like swimming for the first time, stroking and panting and dancing across the sea of stars. It was demanding to find the way and keep the vision steady—oh yes! But every light-year passed was a triumph, and she and Mara and Joizee-Bob (wherever they were now—how she missed them!) had threaded the passage so well on their last flight that they'd arrived ahead of schedule, wishing that they could turn around and fly it again. Such a release of feelings she had in the net! Such cooperation!

And those memories mingled with hopes of flights to come, flights that would vault the distances of much greater space, with new crewmates or maybe some of the old, flights that so far were nothing but hopes . . . hopes, and frustration, and pain . . .

She quickly tried to divert her thoughts from that, but the direction was inevitable; she could not control it. Before she could even catch her breath, she was showering Dap with other visions. Visions of the past . . .

Visions of pain.

Glimpses of her frightened half-brother Levin, steeling himself against the abuse of their uncaring father, so frightened that he was unable to reach out even to his sister, rejecting even her sympathy. Glimpses of Levin striding out of the house and out of sight down the road in

dwindling daylight; of Jael herself gazing at her father's closed door, unable to gain his attention, suffering and wanting and needing . . . but her father was too busy with the machinations of his business, too busy with his consorts . . .

Jael, what is this? Dap whispered.

Images of Jael, years later, this year, arming herself with a self-esteem she didn't feel, and reporting to the rigger hall. But it wasn't like the rigger school, where she'd known classmates she liked and trusted, where at least some people hadn't known yet of her father. Instead, the images were of her rigging on the only two paying flights she'd gotten in the year since her graduation, before word of who she was had spread finally to the last corners of the shipping community. They were solitary flights, because she was fearful of seeking out companions, ashamed to let her fellow riggers know of her deep loneliness and need . . .

Jael, I had no idea! It . . . it doesn't have to be that way!

The anguish welled up in her. Doesn't it? What was I supposed to do? Can't you see that no one would fly with me? No one, no one . . .

But Jael, you have to assert your rights. You can't just . . . I don't know . . . hide from it!

Oh no? How about this? She couldn't prevent it from spilling out now in a great rush: all the years of loneliness and failed hope, glimpses of her inner self that she had never meant to let anyone see. It was all pouring into the dreamlink now, thundering onto Dap like a waterfall: her anger toward her father for ruining her dreams—not by forbidding them, but by failing to care, failing to make her dreams his own—by destroying the honor of the name LeBrae through his greed and dishonesty in the spacing business. And there was anger not just toward her father, but toward her brother as well—for his unwillingness to stand, and to *live*. And anger toward herself—for not cutting them both loose and making her own way in the world—for being a failure, not just as a rigger, but as a person.

In the dizzying energy of the dreamlink, she could sense that the link between Dap and herself was straining, like a fabric being pulled, stretched, torn. What was she doing? The openness of mind and soul was the dreamlink's strength, and its danger. Leaking back to her through the link was Dap's surprise, and dismay, his astonishment that anyone could feel, or could release such staggering need.

Just fantasies, she lied to him, but the lie crumpled in an instant. *I can't help it, I didn't want you to*—and her coherent thoughts broke off as her embarrassment became a trembling glow, reddening the images of the link.

Jael, he whispered, I didn't expect—how could I know? How could you be keeping all of this inside?

And Dap's thoughts blurred into a hiss of static as he struggled to absorb what she'd shown him. For a few moments, no words came back to her through the dreamlink, no comprehensible thoughts. Dap seemed so appalled by her need. He seemed to want to pull away. She sensed his . . . what? Revulsion?

Jael, I knew it was hard for you, but . . . how can you . . . how could anyone . . . live with this? And his thoughts lost all clarity and spun away.

Dap! You promised me understanding! *Wait—please don't—!*

But it was too late; the bond was severed, torn by Dap's horror. What else could he possibly feel? *Dap!* But he was already doing what any sane person would do. Without a sound he closed himself off from the dreamlink. Without physically moving, he faded like a ghost from the glow that had become the world around Jael, the glow that was now only a suffocating shield around her, protecting only her own hurt and self-loathing. She sensed that Dap could no longer even look at her; she sensed him rising from his seat and turning away, leaving the room. And she cried mutely in pain.

She made herself her own last audience; she let her pain dance in the field like threads of fire, tightening around her like a noose, choking her. There was no one here to help her escape from

her pain—there never had been, not in Dap, nor in her father before—they forgot their promises and closed the door on her, one just like the other. She wanted to kill someone, she wanted to kill them both, she would kill herself with this hatred if she didn't do something to—

—control it—

—bottle it—

—which she did, gathering it in from the burning glow of the dreamlink and wrapping it tightly around her finger and corking it back inside where it belonged. And then, when she knew she was safe and still sane, she rose and turned off the dreamlink augmentor. The glow died, leaving the room cold and silent and sterile. There was nothing here that could hurt her now.

Except what lived within her.

Unwilling to cry, unable to answer Dap's croaking harshness—"Wait, Jael! I'll take you home!"—from the hallway, she strode out of the room and out of the house and began the long trek on foot back to her room, through the gathering evening darkness.

Chapter 3

Contract to Fly

WHEN SHE arrived the next morning at the spaceport lobby where the riggers mobbed and brooded, she saw, to her relief, no sign of Dap. He'd caught up with her last night, followed her in the car to make sure she got home safely; but she'd been too angry to get in or speak with him. She'd been embarrassed, humiliated, shamed. She couldn't believe that his concern was sincere, not after the way he'd left her like that in the dreamlink.

She would put Dap behind her, as she had put all of the others behind her. Regardless of what anyone here at the spaceport thought, she meant to rig on a starship. She would not be kept from it by Dap or by her fellow riggers or by what anyone thought of her father. They could discriminate if they wanted to, but they couldn't stop her.

Her determination kept her going through that day. But the presence of the other riggers in the halls was a drain on her spirit—not so much any one individual as the sheer numbers, the weight of all the riggers competing with her for work. She found herself glancing across the lobby from time to time, watching the activities of the unregulated shippers. Once in a while, a rigger drifted over that way from the lounge, but most of the riggers who worked for the unregulateds stayed away from their peers on this side of the lobby. There was a clear, if unofficial, class distinction between the two groups of riggers. Those who worked for the unregulateds were more poorly trained and paid, more exploited, more likely to fly substandard equipment, more likely not to return from space. And in those riggers, there was often a certain look in the eyes, an appearance of resignation, weariness, and defeat.

Never will I do that, she had vowed. And as she watched, thinking of the riggers who had worked for, and been worn out by her father, she silently renewed that vow. And yet . . . she knew that for many unfortunate riggers, it was the only way to make it into space. On this planet, at least, there were too many riggers and not enough registered ships. And when one had the dream . . . when one was driven by the need, by the compulsion . . . it was a matter either of taking whatever means there was to get into space, or of withdrawing into a self-absorption that made them unfit for any work at all—except maybe the selling of their dreams and visions to the commercial dreamtapers, and what a squandering of talent that was. But so too was it a waste to be used up and discarded by shippers who valued one's talents only for a brief and inexpensive career. No, she wouldn't give in to that temptation. Not yet, anyway.

She left the spaceport feeling discouraged, but not beaten. Not quite. She went to the rigger hall library and spent a couple of hours alone, running simulations of local star routes. For a time, she managed to keep her spirits up.

By the next morning her courage seemed to have evaporated. She opened her eyes and stared up at the blank ceiling, without the slightest trace of hope. She spent most of the day in her room—withdrawn, trying to muster the will to return to the spaceport, but unable to find the determination. When she shook herself out of her mood, finally, late that afternoon, she vowed that she would, she must return for the spacing calls the following morning.

That simple declaration gave her the focus she needed to begin gathering her inner strength again. It took just one day to get an assignment, she reminded herself—one right day, one right convergence of events. It was a matter of persisting until the stewards could no longer deny her without due cause. And because she had the credentials and she had good performance reports on the flights she had made, there was no due cause, no just reason for denying her work. There was only prejudice because of her father—because more than one shipper here claimed that Willie LeBrae had cheated them out of business. But prejudice could be overcome. Had to be overcome. With persistence. With strength.

She was reminded of just what kind of strength it would take when the following day she

arrived well in advance of the morning call, and watched the stewards pass her over in favor of three riggers her own grade who had come in after her. It took another hour, but eventually her anger reached the boiling point. She approached one of the stewards. "I want to know why you won't give me a chance," she said, in a voice that to her, anyway, seemed loud.

The steward looked surprised by her question. He glanced around the rigger lounge, where several people had looked up. A thin smile cracked his features. "Well, now." He rubbed his fingernails across the front of his blue shirt. "You must really want to fly, I guess."

"Yes. And you know it." Jael glared at him, until his smile became waxen and twisted by self-consciousness. "I don't care what you think of my father's company, either," she said. "I had nothing to do with it. Nothing."

The steward looked down for a moment, his lips moving in silent thought. His eyebrows went up. "You think we're not being fair—because of your father?"

You know damn well, she thought bitterly. But she said nothing; she just kept the steward fixed in her scowling gaze.

"What do you expect me to do?" The steward cast a deliberate glance across the lobby, toward the unregulated quarter, as if to suggest, Why don't you go over there?

"You can give me work!" Jael snapped, ignoring his intimation. She was suddenly aware of an increasing number of people looking in her direction, but she no longer cared. "On this side," she said, a little more softly. "I've earned it."

The steward's eyes narrowed.

"My ratings are good enough."

He shrugged. "Maybe."

"You know they're good enough." She was pushing her luck, she knew. But what did she have to lose?

"I'll see what I can do," he muttered, and turned away.

She started to call after him. But the steward had already dismissed her. She returned to the lounge and took a seat in silence. Almost, she made the room go away by retreating to her inner mind, but something told her not to let it go that easily; even as she called to mind happier images, she kept one eye on the steward's corner. She would not let him think that she had quit, or forgotten.

The next three hours passed slowly indeed.

* * *

"LeBrae." Poke. "*Jael*." Poke.

Her eyes flew open. She was being nudged awake in her chair by the young rigger she'd seen the other day, Toni Gilen. "What? What is it?" she murmured.

"Over there." Toni was pointing in the direction of the registration area. "They asked me to come get you."

"Who did?" Jael asked. But she already saw who Toni was pointing at. Beyond the lounge area, the steward she'd talked to was standing beside a large, bearded man dressed in a black tunic-length vesta robe over loose black pants. They were discussing something, and glancing in her direction. "They want to see me?" she asked Toni.

The younger rigger's eyes widened, and she took a seat without saying anything more.

Very well, then, Jael thought. They want to see me. She straightened her clothes and strode toward the two men.

"Is this the one?" the large man asked the steward as she approached.

The steward's lips curled into a self-satisfied smile. "This is Miss LeBrae."

"LeBrae?" said the other man. He nodded, as though in thought. "What's your first name, Miss?" he asked, in a gravelly voice.

"Jael. Jael LeBrae," she said. "Qualified for Class Three single and Class Five multiple." Her voice trembled slightly, and she struggled to keep it steady.

The shipper pursed his lips. "Would you be interested in flying a Class Three single, Jael?"

Her heart thumped, and she almost squawked, Yes! But caution made her swallow the urge, and she stammered, "Could you tell me . . . please . . . the particulars on your ship?" She glanced at the steward, who was supposed to act as the provider of such information.

The steward's gaze was guarded, but his voice was needle-sharp. "I thought you were anxious to fly."

"I'll tell you everything you want to know," the shipper boomed, interrupting. "My name is Captain Deuteronomous Mogurn, and I'm flying a freighter, *Cassandra*. She's out in docking bay 27 right now, ready to go as soon as she's crewed."

"And your cargo?" the steward intoned, fulfilling his role sarcastically.

"Artifact goods of substantial value," Mogurn said with a wink. It wasn't clear whether the wink was meant for Jael or for the steward. But the cargo description was as much as he was required to give, and no more. No specifics were required to be given the rigger, though there was no reason to expect secrecy, either.

Jael blinked, considering his answer. "And . . . your registry information?"

The two men exchanged glances. Then Mogurn slowly smiled. "Perhaps we should step over here to discuss that," he said, gesturing away from the rigger area.

Jael froze, and for the space of perhaps three seconds, she was aware of nothing except the pounding of her heart. What did that mean? Unregistered? Registry stewards were not supposed to engage in solicitation for unregistered shipping. Was someone being paid off here? *What are you doing to me?*

The two stood waiting for her response, their expressions betraying nothing. She tried to find her voice, and at last managed, "Why can't we talk about it here?"

For an instant, the two men seemed taken aback. Then the steward's smile widened slightly, and he answered, "Well, Miss LeBrae, what we're offering you is something a little different. And you have to discuss it over there—if you want to go to space, that is."

I told you, she whispered to herself, then realized that she hadn't spoken the words aloud. She cleared her throat. "I don't want to fly unregulated. I said that before."

"This isn't, perhaps, what you think it is," Captain Mogurn said in a dry voice. "Won't you even hear us out?"

As she looked back at him, she couldn't tell whether she should dismiss him out of hand or not. Perhaps it wouldn't hurt to hear what he was offering; after all, no one could force her to fly. "Okay," she mumbled reluctantly, and followed the shipper a short distance away from the rigger lounge. The steward bowed, and somewhat to her relief, left them.

Mogurn led her to a quiet corner, then turned, and for a moment seemed to examine her critically, looking her up and down. Jael felt her face growing warm under the scrutiny; she was aware, more than ever, of her slight stature, of her youth. After a moment he said, "Do you mind telling me, Jael, why you wish to go into space?"

The question took her by surprise. She'd expected to be asked about her record, her skills—but not this, not so bluntly. How could she explain a burning desperation to fly—to see space again, to witness the landscapes of the Flux? Her voice caught a little, as she tried to answer. "I suppose it's really . . . the only thing that interests me."

"The chance to see all those worlds?"

"Yes . . . I guess. But mostly it's the flying. It's what I'm good at. I don't . . ." She hesitated.

"Don't what, Jael?"

She groped for words. "I . . . don't know what I'd do if I couldn't rig." And at once she regretted her forthrightness. She didn't even know this man!

Mogurn chuckled softly. "You wouldn't turn inward like a vegetable, would you, like some

of your peers?" His thick eyebrows quivered, and she couldn't tell if he was laughing at her, or at all riggers who couldn't live without their chosen work.

She shrugged indignantly.

"Well," Mogurn said, his tone changing to one of accommodation, "would it surprise you to know that I understand how you feel? That I know what it's like to want, even to *need* to do something? That something like that got *me* into space in the first place?" He stroked the front of his vesta robe, scowling. A slight twitch had appeared in the corner of his left eye, and he rubbed at it for a moment with his fingertips. "This is all a long-winded way of saying, maybe you shouldn't lump all shippers in the same category. There are some unregisteredds who are better than some of your fully registered shippers."

"Well—"

"There are shippers here, I imagine, that someone like you should never come near. Registered shippers. People who would use you and throw you out like an old dog when you were no longer useful to them." Mogurn's eyes, which were blue-grey and more than a little bloodshot, squinted at her. "Stay away from those people, Jael! No good can come of dealing with them!"

She blinked, unable to answer. Of course there were shippers like that. Her own father had been one of them. Was Mogurn claiming to be different?

"But don't throw the good out with the bad," Mogurn continued, gazing across the lobby. He stood beside her now, as though standing *with* her. He glanced back over toward the rigger area. "It's not always so great over on that side, either."

"What do you mean?"

His breath hissed out heavily; he was a very solidly built man, but he seemed slightly asthmatic. She wondered how old he was. Fifty, maybe? Sixty? "Don't you know?" he asked. "I think you do." And he paused, as though to make the point, "Regulated, unregulated—there's no guarantee you'll be treated fairly either way. Wouldn't you agree?"

Jael flushed and nodded ever so slightly. "I guess that's sometimes true."

"Of course. We both know it. And the *regulators* know it. And yet they maintain this fiction that the only safe way for a rigger to work is within their cozy little system—where they have control!" Mogurn seemed to realize that he was speaking too loudly; he cleared his throat and readjusted the shoulders of his vesta.

Jael could not answer. She'd been thrown off balance by his assertion, but how could she deny it? The registry made a pretense of fairly apportioning jobs, but it was only a pretense, and no one resented it more than she.

"May I ask you something?"

Startled, she tried to focus on Mogurn's words; she kept drifting off into her thoughts. "What?"

He rubbed his cheek. "How old are you, Jael?"

"Why? What does that matter? I'm sixteen, local. That's about eighteen, standard."

"Yes. Well, I just wanted to point out that you cannot expect to fly all of your life. Most riggers have to stop by the time they're twenty-four or twenty-five, unless they're exceptional." He paused. "Perhaps you are exceptional. But . . ."

She closed her eyes. She knew what he was going to say.

When she looked again, he was gesturing toward the lounge full of riggers waiting, passing time, and she thought of all the boredom and frustration there, and knew he had pointed at the truth: most of those riggers would end their careers in frustration, rarely flying; and with each passing year, many of them would slowly lose that curious, intangible inner vision that had made them riggers in the first place. "You might not have that much time left, Jael," Mogurn said in a soft growl. "And I'm offering you a chance."

She trembled, two powerful desires conflicting in her mind. Never, she had promised herself.

Never would she fly with an unregulated shipper. But what if her choice was that, or never to fly at all? Which was worse? Was she being ruled even now by her father—by her reaction to him? Was she wrong to assume that all unregulateds were like him?

"And," Mogurn continued, "I'm offering even more. I'm offering something that can help you become one of those exceptional ones."

She turned. "What do you mean?"

His eyebrows arched. "I have a method, Jael. It is both a training device and a reward. Riggers on many other worlds compete for it—a way to enhance their skill, to improve the odds. You've been at an unfair disadvantage here—but I can help you, if you fly my *Cassandra*. And that is a promise that I'll wager none of these others"—and he jerked his head toward the registry area—"can offer."

Jael drew a sharp breath, her suspicion conflicting with her curiosity . . . with her desire, flaming in her heart. "I . . . don't know." A way to improve her chances in the future? She at least ought to consider it. Shouldn't she? "Can't you tell me more about what it is?"

Mogurn sighed impatiently. "Can I tell you what love is, Jael? Or life? You have to experience it, to know. And now you must display some courage, and the will to fly!"

Jael looked away from him, stalling.

"Don't be undecided too long, Miss LeBrae," Mogurn warned. "I subscribe to a shipper's code of ethics. But I need a rigger for my ship, and soon. If you are not interested in flying, I must seek another. I have little time, and I have given you much of it already." Mogurn's eyes seemed to bore into hers.

A hundred thoughts flew through her mind: all of her vows, her hopes and doubts and fears, and her determination to fly. She gazed at the rigger lounge and saw the steward who had brought her to Mogurn. He saw her, as well, and his eyebrows went up as he turned away, as though saying, There will never be a job for you here, not on this side. And she felt a renewed rage and frustration, and for a moment, she felt utterly incapable of decision. Then her determination burned through again, and she drew a slow breath. *Which is more important—some self-defeating vow, or flying?* She remembered her father standing over her, saying, "Never pity yourself, Jael! Seize the moment!" She never thought she would take her father's advice, but as she looked back up at Mogurn, she heard herself saying, "I want to know more about your ship before I say yes or no. Do you have the specs and service records for me to see?"

A smile twitched at the corner of Mogurn's mouth, and he nodded. "Of course. If you'd like to come with me, you can review everything." And Jael swallowed and drew herself to her full height and followed him across the lobby.

Chapter 4

Departure

SHE MET Dap on her way out. She was just tucking her flight contract into her tunic pocket when she saw him approach.

"Jael, wait! Please," he said, falling into step beside her. "Can I talk to you—please?"

She paused in midstride and looked at him, frowning. She no longer felt angry, exactly, just distant. "About what?" She started walking again, more purposefully than she had walked in a long time.

"Well, I don't . . . I just . . . just want to apologize," he stammered. "Jael, I know I was rude the other night. I don't blame you for being mad."

"Good," she sighed.

"But I wish . . . I wish you hadn't walked off like that! I could have explained why I was . . . anyway, I'm really sorry."

"Yes. So you said before," she answered, not meeting his gaze.

"I guess you don't believe me, but at least let me try to explain!"

"I believe you," she lied. "I'm very sorry, Dap, but I've just signed onto a ship and I have to get ready to leave. Maybe I'll see you when I get back."

That stopped him in his tracks. She barely glanced back at him as he hurried to catch up again. "You got a job? That's wonderful! I'm really happy for you. Jael, who is it with?"

That stopped *her*. She sighed to herself and turned. "Do you really care?"

"Yes, of course I do!"

"I'm flying with a shipper named Deuteronomous Mogurn, and his ship is *Cassandra*." She had a feeling of unreality as she heard herself saying the words.

Dap's brow furrowed. "Mogurn? I don't know the name. But *Cassandra*. Isn't that an unregist—"

She stepped away angrily. "I know what it is. You don't have to tell me—"

"Wait—I didn't mean—*Jael!*" He finally grabbed her arm and physically brought her to a halt. "Jael, you aren't flying an unregistered ship, are you? After everything you said?"

"Yes I am and would you please let go of my arm?"

He stared at her, dumbfounded. "But . . . why?" His grip loosened.

She pulled her arm free and straightened up. "Because I want to fly and it has been made clear that that is my only avenue at this spaceport. Is that reason enough?"

"But . . . you don't have to . . . you could tell them—"

"What, Dap? What? I just accepted the job and gave my word that I would be aboard in three hours. All right?" She started to walk away again, but something in his expression made her pause and look back at him.

He nodded and said softly, "I guess I understand. If I had to, I suppose I might do the same." His eyes seemed to lose their focus as he gazed out over the hills. He shook his head, then focused back on Jael. "But I really hope . . ."

She waited. She didn't know why she was standing there listening to him, but she waited. "Hope what?" she said finally.

"That . . . you've chosen well. That you'll be . . . very careful." He swallowed, then rumbled in his pocket. "Here, I'd like to give you something." He brought out a thin gold chain, with a small, luminous stone on it. "This was from Deira, to me. She said it was to help me remember our time in the net together. Well . . ." he cleared his throat nervously—Jael had never seen him so fidgety before—"I'd like you to have it as a keepsake. Sort of a good luck charm. And a way of saying, I hope it works out all right for you . . . out there." He held the chain out to her, his gaze wide and earnest.

She hesitated, then opened her palm and slowly closed it around the cool metal chain, the stone. For a moment, she almost forgave him for the other night, but the weight of her anger was too great, and her fear over what she was about to do too strong. She could find no words to say any of that, so instead she said, "Okay. Thanks. And now, I really have to go."

"Good trip, Jael."

She sighed and nodded. Then she turned and strode, then ran, up the hill toward the multidorm and her quarters.

* * *

She set her bag on the ground and looked up at the starship. It was a modest-sized floater: silver-grey, shaped like a flared, flattened teardrop. It drooped like a guppy's belly in the middle and was festooned with a variety of protrusions for maneuvering units and flux-field and rigger-net projectors. The name *Cassandra* was painted in black just above the bulge of the flux-field reactors, but the letters were well worn by the elements of space and atmosphere, as were the identifying numerals amidships. It looked like a sturdy enough vessel, though one could hardly tell much by external appearances. Still, the service log had seemed acceptable, more carefully annotated than she had expected from an unregulated shipper; and the owner was flying with her, as captain, which provided some incentive for good maintenance. Perhaps her worries about substandard equipment, at least, were unjustified. The spaceport service crew had just driven away as she had walked up. She would check over the rigger controls herself before departure.

Jael strode to the base of the ship where it nested in the docking cradles. The outer door of the entry lock was open, at the top of a short ramp. She stepped into the airlock and searched the door panel for the communication switch. "Jael LeBrae. Request permission to come aboard."

There was a short silence. Then a staticky voice answered, "Come on up to the bridge, Jael. Top level. Seal the lock when you come."

She touched the appropriate switches and stepped into the ship. The outer hatch, then inner hatch, hissed closed. She glanced around at the power deck; the ladder up was in a pool of light, spilling down from deck two. She slung her bag strap over her shoulder and climbed. The next level was a second engineering deck. She located and climbed one more ladder, and stepped off into a tight, ring-shaped hallway. It took only a moment to figure out the layout. In the center of the ring was the commons area; several other doors around the outer circumference of the hall were living quarters. Around the circle to her right was the entrance to the bridge.

Mogurn emerged from the bridge and greeted her. "Put your bag in the first cabin, then come join me on the bridge. We're checking out for flight." He turned and disappeared again.

Jael pressed the entry plate on the next door beyond the bridge. When the door paled, she walked through it into the cabin. It was small and spare: a bunk, a fold-down chair, and a tiny lavatory. All perfectly standard, perfectly Spartan. She stepped back out into the hallway, opaqued the door, and hurried to the bridge.

It was dimly lit, but filled with illuminated displays, Mogurn was seated at the front, his back to her; he was inspecting a thicket of instruments, mostly normal-space gear and remotes from the rigger-nets. There were two Seiki-model rigger-stations, one flanking either side of the bridge: couches recessed into tight, horizontal alcoves. That was where she would do her flying. Two rigger-stations, one rigger. The second station was a backup, or possibly where a co-rigger would fly, if there were one. It was hard to tell at a glance; the variety in ship and rigger-station design was almost endless. Some setups were complex, like tall-masted ships of the sea, requiring several riggers working in perfect harmony; others were compact and without frills, perfect for single riggers. She fleetingly wondered if Mogurn might be cutting corners, using only one rigger where two were optimal. Such a thing was not unheard of, especially among unreg—but never mind that, she thought. What sensible owner would endanger a valuable ship

and cargo in order to save one rigger's salary?

"Go ahead and familiarize yourself with the setup," Mogurn said, glancing up into a small mirror. "I'll be through here in a few minutes."

Jael nodded and began looking over the instrumentation near the starboard rigger-station, which was marked as the primary station. She could inspect a station in her sleep if she had to, which was a good thing, because suddenly it was hitting home that she was about to depart for deep space with a man she scarcely knew, and whose credentials were marginal at best. She had flown solo before, yes, but never in such an unprotected fashion. Not that she was concerned for her own personal safety; there were implicit guarantees, even with men like Mogurn.

There had been a time when a female rigger might not have dared to board a ship like this, to be isolated with a man of unknown character for days or weeks at a rime. But over many decades of starship rigging, the loss of too many ships had proven one thing: the fragile balance of sensitivity, imagination, and control that enabled a rigger to steer through the Flux was easily destroyed. Whatever the treatment of unemployed riggers planetside, the well-being of a rigger in flight was considered sacrosanct. Even the unlicensed shippers acknowledged that fact. Even Jael's own father had recognized it.

These reassurances flickered through her mind as she ran through her checklist on the rigger-station. It was important to make herself ready for flight, as well as her station. The worries of the world, of the rigger halls and the spaceports, had to be purged from her thoughts. The sooner her head was clear, the smoother and safer the flight would be.

"We're bound for Lexis on the first leg," Mogurn remarked, without turning. "Bypassing the mountain route, of course."

"Ah," Jael said, searching her memories for what she'd learned in training about that route. Oh, yes . . .

"No point in getting into any trouble with . . . unnecessary hazards . . . on that mountain route, is there?" Mogurn added.

"I guess not," Jael murmured. There were legends about the route from decades of rigging, but perhaps no more than with any of a hundred other unusual regions, each replete with legends. What was it here? Dragons, as she recalled. Nothing to worry her.

"No. No point in getting into trouble," Mogurn said. He was still busy at the nose of the bridge, and for a few moments, neither of them spoke. Jael continued her checkout. Then he asked, "You do know the route, don't you?"

Jael paused. She had never flown to Lexis, but she knew the essentials of the route, the library hypno-briefings on the various currents of the Flux. She said as much to Mogurn.

He turned in his seat and gazed at her. "Well, I've been that way many times. So even if you're the rigger and I'm not, I trust you'll accept some guidance in the matter of navigation."

She blinked. "Of course," she said, shrugging.

"Good." Mogurn turned back to his panels. "Just so you know. The mountains are dangerous. I'll expect you to keep me informed."

As if she wouldn't do that anyway, she thought, checking the last of the instruments on the outside of the station. She leaned in to peer at the actual flight readouts. "All right if I—"

"Go ahead. It's part of your checklist isn't it?"

"Yes." She slid into the alcove, reclining on her back on the couch. Squirring into a comfortable position, she allowed the nape of her neck to touch the neural contacts in the neckrest, and she waited for the tingle which confirmed that she was in contact with the dormant net control. She focused her eyes on the instruments over her head and began bringing power to the control system. After a few moments, she closed her eyes and allowed the tingle of the system to spread into her limbs and into her mind.

She felt herself surrounded by darkness. She reached into the sensory net with imaginary hands and tested it, probing at its limits to see how it felt. The net was still confined within the

spacecraft hull—it would be extended fully only after they were in space—but its form was sufficient for testing. She stretched the arms of her imagination against the darkness, and her inner eye sketched out lines of perspective against that darkness, lines that gave shape to the nonspace surrounding her. As she explored the field with her mind, her physical body remained motionless on the couch. Once she was satisfied that the field was responding adequately to her thoughts, she withdrew from the net, withdrew back into her physical body.

She opened her eyes. The monitors overhead gave a reading of the field strengths she had used in this simple check, and the trial efficiencies of the field. She pursed her lips and nodded. It was well within acceptable limits.

There was a movement beside her, and she realized that Mogurn was standing beside the rigger-station. He bent down and peered in. His eyes shifted back and forth, scrutinizing her. What was he doing—looking for flaws, for signs of weakness? His eyes, close up, looked bloodshot and rheumy. "Everything okay?" he asked.

"Seems to be," she said, running her fingers over the monitor faces. It made her uncomfortable to be stared at. There was no reason why he shouldn't observe her, of course; he had a right to know if his ship was in capable hands.

"Good. We'll be lifting soon. You have anything you need to do before I call for the tow?" Mogurn asked.

"May I have a minute in my cabin?"

Mogurn straightened up. "Of course. I'll make the call now. It'll take them a few minutes to get to us, I imagine."

As she slipped out of the rigger-station, he was leaning back in his command seat, watching her. She could not read his expression, but she was aware of his gaze on her back as she walked off the bridge.

In her cabin, she spent a few minutes stowing the contents of her duffel and poking around in the drawers and compartments. She paused to gaze at herself in the tiny wall mirror. Her face looked a little drawn, she thought, and her flyaway brown hair needed brushing. But her hazel eyes were clear and determined; or at least, they seemed that way when she frowned at herself and thought, *You're committed now. It doesn't matter whether you were smart or not. Just do the job and do it right, and it'll be okay in the end.* She tried to smile. The expression looked foolish to her.

Enough. Time to make ready for space.

* * *

"Jael, is your station set?" Mogurn asked, from the nose of the bridge.

"Set," she answered, looking up at the monitors one more time. There was really nothing for her to do at this point but enjoy the ride and keep a watch on the systems for later.

"Tow *Juliette*, this is *Cassandra*. At your convenience," Mogurn said.

She couldn't see him from where she lay in the rigger-station, but in the monitor, she could see the tow ship as it approached Mogurn's ship from overhead. It looked like a thin four-legged spider dropping down on an invisible silk thread. Soon it blocked the overhead view as it settled atop *Cassandra* and latched with a barely perceptible bump. Then Jael felt a vibration under her couch as the landing dock freed the ship. A moment later, a weight pressed lightly upon her as they lifted free of the ground and began to climb. In one monitor she could see the ground falling away; in another, she could see the globes at the ends of the spider's legs glowing red, then orange. Those were the Circadie space inductors that would propel them into orbit and take them well away from the planetary mass of Gaston's Landing, far enough away to begin the rest of the voyage under their own power.

A few moments after liftoff, the ship's gravity fields came up on internal power, and the

feeling of weight on her chest subsided. The monitors confirmed, however, that the true acceleration was increasing. The curvature of the planet became visible as the sky turned black, and Jael wished her homeworld a silent farewell.

Minutes later, the planet was visible as an enormous ball in space, shrinking as they left their orbit behind. Jael felt exhilaration rising in her breast as the ship and its tow accelerated across the emptiness of the planetary system, the stars brightly beckoning before them. It was a good feeling, a true rigger feeling, the almost primal joy of bursting the bonds of planetary life, of expanding outward, stretching, reaching. And as she watched it all happen in her monitors, she began to trace the Flux indicators, the signs that would tell her when it was safe to submerge the ship for the real journey. And she began to imagine the coming entry into the Flux, to prepare in her own mind for what was to come.

Chapter 5

Captain Mogurn

"YOU'RE ON your own, *Cassandra*. Have a good flight."

"We are clear, *Juliette*. Thank you."

Jael was aware of Mogurn's voice on the communicator; and she was aware of the tow's space inductors changing color as it altered course and broke away; and she was aware of the tow dwindling and disappearing into the night, just as the planet had. But mostly she was aware of the dormant field tingling around her as she prepared for Mogurn's okay. Her mind was filled with an expectation of images, of landscapes.

"Jael, are you ready?" came Mogurn's voice directly in her ear-com.

"On your signal."

"Are you familiarized with the course?"

She frowned at the monitor where she'd been reviewing the navigational library information. "As clear as I can be without actually taking us in there."

There was a movement nearby, and she realized that Mogurn had walked back to peer directly down into her rigger-station. She shifted her eyes in his direction, but only for a moment. It was more important to keep an even keel mentally than to respond directly to his presence. She sensed Mogurn returning to his seat at the front. "Very well," she heard. "Set course for Lexis. At your discretion, rigger."

Her eyes closed and she felt her own lips tracing a smile. The sensory net sprang to life around her, filled her with energy. She relaxed as her bodily senses darkened. Her inner senses threaded their way into the net and reached outward into space. Altering the shape of the net with unspoken commands, she sank her fingernails into the fabric of space itself, and without fanfare, drew the spaceship into the realm that would carry it to the stars. It was the energy of the flux-pile that did the work, of course, but she guided the flow of the energy. Silently, swiftly, like a swimmer upending herself and stroking downward into the depths of a sea, she left behind the cold emptiness of normal-space, and swam down through the shifting multidimensional layers of space-time, down into the currents of the Flux. And she towed the starship along behind her.

What she saw next was a synthesis of her own intuition and the reality of the spacetime topography that she had just entered. She and the starship were floating in a sea of turquoise mist, translucent and cool. It was an undersea color, but the mist was airy and swirling, and it shifted like cirriform clouds touched by a high jetstream. Jael extended her arms like wings—strong limbs that were at once imaginary and real—and she stroked the mists as they passed her by, until she began to sense the wind direction and currents. She stretched her wings a bit wider and felt them bite into the current, and she executed a slow bank to her left and caught sight of what looked like a lemon-lime sunset in the distance. That, she knew instantly and intuitively, was where she wanted to go.

That knowledge was all she needed. She caught the wind, and she and the starship took flight upon the streams of space.

* * *

Jael, how are you doing in there? Mogurn's voice reached her through the net, through the ghostly presence of the com-signal.

I feel good. It's going well. She had been flying for a couple of hours already. The mists had given way to a clear tangerine sky. Smudges of charcoal cloudiness in the sky indicated distant presences, perhaps the analogs of stars or nebulas in the adjoining regions of normal-space. She had turned the starship into an image of a broad-winged airplane, and she was steering a course

well clear of all such disturbances.

It's time you came out for a while. I don't want you getting fatigued. Are you in a clear stretch? Can you leave the net?

Jael considered. *Pretty clear. I guess so.* She felt reluctant to leave it behind. But she knew that his instructions were probably wise. It would not do to push too far, especially since the flight was just beginning. Still . . .

Do so, then. Set your stabilizers. Mogurn's voice was calm but unequivocal.

Doing so now, she sighed. It took only a moment to adjust the net's stabilizers. Like a sea-anchor, they would keep the ship drifting quietly and safely during her absence. She pulled her imaginary arms back to her sides and withdrew from the net.

With a blink, she focused on the monitors overhead. Her physical senses returned to her gradually, as she became aware of light entering her eyes and the weight of her body pressing down on the couch. She drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Only after she felt that she had really returned to her body did she climb out of the rigger-station.

The bridge seemed like a small chamber of arcane technology after the free open spaces of the net. Mogurn rose from his seat at the nose and turned to face her. "The readings look smooth and stable. That tells me that you are flying skillfully," he said. "But we must not overdo it. Besides, I have something for you now—a sort of reward for work well done." He smiled broadly.

A reward for work well done? she thought. Work well done was its own reward. Then she remembered his promise, back at the spaceport. Something about a learning method.

"But perhaps you'd like to eat first," Mogurn said. He pursed his lips. "Yes. We will eat first. And then you will experience . . . the *pallisp*. You will enjoy it, I think. And as for what it will do for your rigging ability . . ." He shrugged, and his smile widened.

Pallisp? She opened her mouth to ask, "What is . . ."

But Mogurn wasn't listening. He gestured toward the exit and followed her off the bridge and to the commons in the center of the ship's circle. "What would you like, Jael?" he asked, gesturing toward the auto-food panels. "Are you hungry? How about . . . oh, some nicely crisped carrot-fish?" Before Jael could answer, he nodded, to himself and touched several buttons. The smell of frying fish filled the commons.

Jael shrugged. Fish was all right with her, she supposed. While Mogurn fussed with the settings, she sat at the round table in the center of the room and watched. He drew a glass of what looked like a straw-colored ale and turned. "This is nonalcoholic. Would you like some, Jael?"

"Yes, please," she said, wondering if any other response would have made any difference.

Mogurn drew a second glass and placed it in front of her. A minute later, the food panel whispered open, and he pulled out two steaming dinner plates. "Here we are. I think you'll like this."

Jael waited until Mogurn had taken a bite from his own plate before she tentatively lifted a fork and tried a bite of the fish. It looked more like crisped cheese; it tasted like a flavorless vegetable with a breadlike texture. But, she thought, it was no worse than what they served at the rigger halls. And it was food.

Mogurn ate quickly and without conversation. He hummed softly to himself, reaching up occasionally to stroke the back of his neck. When he looked in Jael's direction, he didn't seem to see her; it was as though he were looking at something beyond her, beyond the walls of the room. That was all right; she was happy enough to be silent with her own thoughts. Mogurn, hardly to her surprise, seemed a rather self-absorbed person. She doubted that he would be very good company even if he spoke.

She was only halfway through her meal when Mogurn rose, leaving his dishes and utensils on the table. He pointed to a black panel and said, "The dirty things go in there. When you're finished tidying up, come to my cabin. It's the second door after yours." In response to her

surprised expression, he added, "Don't be long, please." And then he turned, his robe swirling, and left the commons.

Jael stared after him and scowled at what was left of her dinner, which now seemed unappetizing. She started to formulate a reply—that she was employed as a rigger, not as a housekeeper—but cut the thought short. It would do no good to be angry about it. She had to live with Mogurn for the rest of the trip, and she hadn't expected him to be perfect. Perhaps she ought to count her blessings and enjoy the aspect of the flight which was her reason for being here—the rigging, the dreamlike freedom of the net. The thought calmed her enough to take a few more bites, before she decided that she was no longer hungry. She drank some of the ale, then carried everything from the table to the disposal panel. A soft whine told her that the processing unit had accepted her offering and was tidying up.

She stood, looking around the room, wishing that she could simply return to the net and continue flying. But she remembered Mogurn's instructions. Don't be long. Very well, then. She would go to the captain's cabin, and she would see what this "pallisp" business was all about.

The corridor was virtually silent, only the whisper of the air circulator breaking the stillness. She found Mogurn's cabin door—the ship was so small that it was only a few steps to any compartment—and stood before it for several moments, thinking. Then she pressed the signal plate. The door paled and she stepped into Mogurn's cabin.

It was larger than hers, and expensively appointed. A crystal tapestry adorned one wall; it gleamed and twinkled before her eyes, fragments of colored light dancing within it. Beneath the tapestry was a bench-seat. Across the room from the door, Mogurn sat in a velour-covered chair, smoking. He did not look directly at her, but she sensed nevertheless that he was watching her. He exhaled a plume of sharp-scented smoke and waved his long, tubular smoking pipe. "You have come, Jael. Sit." He gestured toward the bench-seat.

Jael obeyed. She looked at him uneasily. For a moment, he made no move to shift from his apparently comfortable position; then he turned his head to gaze at her. "Have you found the course clear and easy to visualize, so far?" he asked.

She inclined her head slightly. "So far."

"And have you sighted the mountains along the route?"

She shook her head. "No mountains yet. I sense some change coming in the landscape. But it's too far away to tell what they are."

"Yes, well . . ." he drew a breath of smoke and exhaled. The smoke eddied up around the ceiling before it was drawn away, gradually, by the ventilators. "That would be the mountains, I expect. You may not see them as mountains, precisely, but that is how it has most often been described to me."

She nodded. She was familiar with the navigational charts. There ought to be no problem.

"You will find danger in those mountains," Mogurn warned, and for a moment his eyes glinted with some unspoken tension. "The way around them to Lexis is longer. But it is safer, and therefore to be preferred."

"Yes," she answered. "As we spoke of before."

Mogurn smiled. "Quite so. As I spoke of before." He glanced at his pipe and set it aside. "And now." He rose and stood before her, and in his hand was a small gleaming cylinder with a dull grey sphere attached to one end. His eyes searched hers briefly. "You've gotten us off to a good start on this trip, Jael. So I especially want you to enjoy this first experience with the pallisp." He glanced down at the instrument in his hand.

She followed his glance with suspicion. Drawing back a little, she pressed her lips together. "What is that?"

"This is the pallisp, Jael." He tilted his head. "It will not harm you." He rubbed at a tic in the corner of his left eye.

"Maybe not," she said doubtfully. "But I don't want to just use it without knowing what it is."

You said it was a learning device, a learning *method*."

"Yes, Jael. Precisely. It is a synaptic enhancement device, specially designed for riggers. It triggers relaxation reflexes in the mind. You should find it restful, and pleasurable. Isn't that all right?" Mogurn peered at her wonderingly, and perhaps impatiently.

Jael shrugged. "I guess so. But what's that have to do with learning?"

Mogurn pursed his lips. "A fair question. The relaxation is only the outward sensation. If you're like most individuals who use it, it will gradually sharpen those very sensitivities that serve you so well in the net. Over time, this pallisp will make you a better rigger, Jael."

She wondered fleetingly why, if it was so good, she had never heard of the pallisp before. It was possible, of course, that a device common on another world simply had not been introduced to Gaston's Landing, which if truth be told was little more than a backwater colony. But if that was the case . . .

She had no more time to think about it, because Mogurn was extending the pallisp toward her right shoulder. She felt a small wave of pleasurable radiation from it, and pulled away. "Wait!" she protested.

"What is it now?" he demanded.

She struggled to put words to her fear. "Are you sure this isn't . . . harmful?"

Mogurn sighed as he shook his head. "I told you. No."

Jael frowned. She wanted to trust him, but . . .

"This is to make you a better rigger, Jael. That's in both of our interests, isn't it? Now, may we begin? Bend your head down and pull your hair away from the back of your neck."

Taking a deep breath, she did as she was told. Mogurn stood close to her and touched the ball of the pallisp to the back of her neck. She shivered with a sensation of warmth, though the touch of the ball was cool. The ball came to rest against the hollow at the base of her skull. The warmth blossomed, flowed first into her brain, then outward into her body, into her limbs. A glow seemed to appear inside her mind, a glow of friendliness and comfort.

It was like the dreamlink, but far better. The golden light that swelled into her awareness was like nothing she had ever felt, but it was like a feeling she had often imagined—a feeling not only of warmth, but of companionship and love—all of the feelings of love that she had ever dreamed of but never felt in reality, emerging from that light and spilling through her in a caressing stream. Unlike the dreamlink, this did not ask her to open herself, did not invite vulnerability. Unlike the dreamlink, this was purest pleasure and fulfillment. It was like floating in a warm, pulsing amniotic sea. It was like being safe again in the womb. . . .

Chapter 6

The Pallisp

SHE SHIVERED as the warmth ebbed away. Don't stop! she wanted to cry. But it was already disappearing; the glow was fading. She felt as though she had just been to Heaven, and she wanted to go back! Blinking, she wondered how long the feeling had lasted; it seemed only moments, but it was like a dream fleeing, intangible. She might have been under the pallisp for hours.

"Are you awake, Jael?"

Drawing a breath, she raised her head and focused. Mogurn was standing in front of her, nodding in apparent satisfaction. He slipped the silver-and-grey pallisp into a pocket inside his vesta. "Um," Jael muttered, suppressing an urge to reach out and seize the pallisp from him. Whatever that instrument was, it was wonderful. Wonderful!

"I told you it would be interesting, Jael. Would you agree with me?"

Slowly, drawing her awareness back in, centering herself, she nodded. Interesting, she thought. Indeed it was.

"Would you like more?"

She peered up into his face and could not read what she saw there. His eyes seemed to focus on her with a greater intensity, a greater curiosity, than she remembered. "I . . ." She faltered without finishing her answer.

"This will become a regular reward for you, for work well done." Mogurn returned to his chair and rested his head back, observing her as she stretched, coming back to full alertness.

"What does it do?" she asked, choosing to let her puzzlement show, rather than her desire for more. "It must stimulate—somehow, I guess—the pleasure center of the brain?" She sounded like an idiot, she knew. But it was not an idiotic question.

"Something like that, Jael. The important thing is that it will help you to release your own greater potential when it comes to flying." He lifted a bushy, half-grey eyebrow. "It's not dangerous, if you're still worried about that. I told you that before." He pursed his lips and let out a deep sigh. "And now, I require your help. Would you come here, please?"

Jael rose unsteadily and approached.

Mogurn shifted restfully. "I'm going to ask you to help me with my own synaptic augmentor. My reward for work well done." His thumb and forefinger stroked away a smile that had come to his lips. His gaze sharpened. "But first you must have your instructions. While I am under the augmentor, you may sleep—after first double-checking our position. You are not to fly, however, unless extraordinary conditions demand it. I will tell you when your next shift begins. Until then you will maintain stability in the Flux, and no more. Is that clear?"

Jael nodded uneasily. She acknowledged, but did not understand his unusual request. Ordinarily, a rigger would determine her own flight routine. Still, she didn't suppose it mattered. She closed her eyes for a moment, remembering the blissful warmth of the pallisp, and she sighed softly. Opening her eyes she saw, hanging from the padded arm of Mogurn's chair, a small holotronic unit with what looked like a headpiece attached to a thin fiber-op cable.

Mogurn's eyes followed hers, and he nodded. Reaching for the headpiece, he said, "I must ask you to help me adjust this." He donned the headpiece, showing her how to adjust the slender contact arms to the proper points on his temples and the back of his neck. "Yes. Now, you must set the controls on the unit. Two hours at intensity four. You must observe the power fluctuation for a moment to make the adjustment. Do you see it?"

When she had followed his instructions, she stepped back warily. Mogurn no longer seemed to notice her presence. He sighed deeply, his eyelids fluttered, and a broad smile came over his features and grew to a grin. His eyes did not close, but appeared to focus on nothing at all. "Are

you . . . is that all right?" But Jael realized, when he did not answer, that there would *be* no answer—not, at least, until the unit switched itself off, two hours from now. And what was Mogurn experiencing under the influence of the synaptic augmentor? Was it like the pallisp? She backed away a few steps and watched him. His hands began to twitch, as though he were in a deep dream-state; they began to take on a life of their own, making squeezing and stroking motions. Jael began to feel embarrassed.

She backed toward the door, fascinated but repelled. Was this what she looked like under the pallisp? She remembered only peacefulness and warmth and light. Whatever this augmentor was designed to do, it looked more powerful than the pallisp, and more dangerous. It looked like nothing she would care to experience.

She crept into the corridor with a feeling of relief. The door turned opaque behind her, leaving Mogurn to his solitude—leaving her alone with the starship, perhaps the only conscious human being between here and the distant star system of Lexis. With a shiver, she circled around the hallway, exploring what little she had not yet seen of the deck: one other empty cabin, and one storage compartment. There was not much else to look at. But she did have another duty to perform.

As she entered the bridge, she could not help remembering the glow of the pallisp. She wished it could have lasted just a little longer; it was so comforting, so reassuring, so restorative. Just a little more . . . She exhaled deliberately and walked forward to the rigger-station. A glance at the readouts told her that nothing had changed much in the net; a glance at the instruments in the nose of the bridge confirmed that all systems were functioning normally.

Should she enter the net? Mogurn had said not to fly, but he'd also said to make sure that all was well. That, in her mind, meant taking a firsthand look. Besides, she wasn't ready to sleep yet.

Slipping into the station, she entered the net. Her senses darkened and reached out of the ship, into the glowing realm of the Flux. It looked exactly as she had left it: tangerine sky and gently sighing breezes bearing the ship like a stately, royal barge toward the horizon. Toward whatever lay beyond. She extended her vision, trying to discern what that might be. Was her sensitivity any sharper now? She couldn't tell. Were there mountains ahead? She felt a presence of something strong and substantial, perhaps mountains. It felt like a living presence. Sometimes the landscape of the Flux was like that; it was as though it were itself alive. Soon they would be close and she would see.

But now it was time to readjust the stabilizers, to close the net and retire. She sighed as she withdrew, as her eyes blinked open, as she studied the hard cold presence of monitors overhead. There were times when she wished she could stay in the net forever. With a frown, she climbed out and took one last look around the bridge, and went to her cabin.

Sleep did not come quickly, or easily. Her thoughts danced between memories of the net and of the pallisp, and feelings of hope and excitement fluttered helplessly against her uneasiness about Mogurn, against the recurring image of the man twitching and sighing under his synaptic augmentor.

At last she drifted off, carried on the winds of sleep and dream.

* * *

She awoke to the sound of Mogurn's voice on the intercom, summoning her to breakfast. They ate in silence, Jael trying to wake up fully for the flying that lay ahead, and half wanting to remain in the somnolence that still enveloped her. But Mogurn, once done with his own breakfast, rose and hurried her to the bridge.

To her relief, he sent her directly into the net, with the same cautions as before. She was on her own to fly. It was Jael and the sparkling net. Jael and the endless currents of the Flux. She reveled in the freedom.

The imagery changed, with a little coaxing from her half-conscious thoughts. An orangish sky turned into an autumn forest in full color, leaves and needles of gold and crimson and russet, rustling in the wind and dancing against the sun. Jael and her ship were a great flying creature, diving and swooping over the forest with whispering speed.

She flew for several hours, threading her way along a twisting wooded valley, along a thin gleaming river, along the twists and turns of spatial dimension that, paradoxically, so shortened the distance between the star systems. She flew with a confidence that her path was straight, figuratively speaking, and true. In time, she found herself remembering the sensations or the pallisp, and while it did not particularly affect her flying, she found herself eagerly awaiting her next exposure to those sensations.

When the time came to leave the net, she did so with a feeling of accomplishment and pride. And, as she'd hoped, Mogurn ushered her into his cabin, and there she bent her head—this time with greater anticipation than nervousness—and received the softly glowing warmth of the pallisp.

And afterward, with the glow still warm in her heart, she gratefully assisted Mogurn with his own synaptic augmentor. She slept then, and awoke eager and ready to fly once more.

* * *

The fourth time she emerged from the pallisp, she did so with what she recognized for the first time as a deep reluctance, a feeling of almost physical attachment to the sensations. It required an effort of will to leave it, and not ask for more. Still, she shook off the feeling and flew her next shift with greater determination, and a greater than ever desire to return to drink again of the pallisp. Almost, she asked Mogurn if they might skip their meal so that she could have the pallisp sooner; but Mogurn's stolid expression, and her own sudden sense of fear and shame, caused her to remain silent and to wait impatiently.

It wasn't until the next day that it dawned on her that she now wanted the pallisp even more than she wanted to fly. She began to wonder if she was perhaps in danger of growing dependent upon the artificial feelings of warmth and companionship that the pallisp gave her, feelings that she craved, but couldn't find elsewhere. She said nothing of her worries to Mogurn, but as she flew over a seemingly endless series of scarlet and umber mesas and canyons, she decided that she would forbear from the pallisp today—just for today—to ensure that she did not actually become addicted to it.

Mogurn's eyes glinted as she said haltingly, over lunch, "I'd like to . . . just rest for a while. I'd like . . . not to use the pallisp this time."

Mogurn studied her, without betraying his thoughts. "Of course, Jael. I wouldn't force you to do anything you don't want to. But if you change your mind, well, the next chance will be—"

"I'm not going to change my mind," she interrupted, wondering, even as she said it, whether it was true.

"Very well, then. Come help me in a few minutes. And then you may relax as you wish." Mogurn rose, and his expression seemed to flicker between irritation and a faintly amused smile.

"Yes," Jael said to the empty room after he'd gone.

"Yes," she repeated a moment later, when she realized that she really did, in fact, want the pallisp.

No. Not this time. She drew herself a cup of fully caffeinated coffee and sipped it slowly, savoring the rush that the caffeine sent to her brain.

When the time came, she went into Mogurn's cabin and, trembling a little, adjusted his synaptic augmentor before retiring to her own cabin. It was only moments later, when genuine crushing despair set in, that she knew she should not have denied herself her reward. The world seemed to close in upon her. Lacking the warmth of the pallisp, she felt only the ponderous

weight of her friendlessness, the emptiness of knowing that she might never again fly with a registered shipper, and the haunting chill of the suspicions she harbored in the back of her mind about Mogurn's character. She felt a terrible weight of oppression. And edging around the corners of her consciousness was the fear that she had been tricked terribly, that she had, in these past few days, succumbed to a force that would never release her—the force of the pallisp.

She wanted it badly now; her heart ached for it.

She sat in her cabin, dreaming of the pallisp, of the golden warmth of it; and she shivered in the air that suddenly seemed cold, and she began to cry a little, but only for a few moments. Taking a deep breath, she blew her nose and began pacing the tiny floor of her cabin. She toyed with a book-cube, then put it aside, and she put on her music necklace and paced some more, with symphonic music swelling in her bones. Nothing helped. She thought of going to Mogurn and begging him for the pallisp, but to do that she would have had to interrupt his own pleasures, and that she dared not do.

Finally she left her cabin and went to the bridge. She took the seat up front and tried to find some comfort in the flickering presence of the instruments. But what she really wanted was to go back into the net. She knew she wasn't supposed to while Mogurn was under his wire . . . except to check on the stability of the net and the Flux.

So, go check.

But I shouldn't, really.

But you know you will in the end.

And, in the end, she did. She took her place in the rigger-station and let her senses expand outward, beyond the ship. They were drifting smoothly, she found, with no sign of instability. She remained in the net, comforted by the scenery—a warm buttery sun shining down on the placid waters of a smooth-flowing river. She felt comforted for a little while—until she began to remember what she had missed in the pallisp . . .

And then she began reflecting upon other things: Dap's heartlessness in the dreamlink, two nights before her departure; and her father, and how he had once been a decent man, or so she'd heard, until his changing fortunes in shipping had changed him as well.

The net began to rumble.

This pattern of thought was not a good one for flying. The sun slid out of sight behind a dark thundercloud. The river's surface began to swirl and eddy and roil. Alarmed, she tried to readjust her thoughts, to keep them focused. Rigging required a delicate balance: the currents and patterns of the Flux were objectively real, but it was her imagination, her thoughts and emotions transmuted through the net, that provided color and detail. And the detail was no less real, coming as it did from her mind. When a rigger's thoughts became disturbed, danger to the ship was always a possibility. And if her sensitivities were growing keener as a result of the pallisp, so too was the danger from imagining the wrong things.

She knew she ought to set the stabilizers and withdraw until she had her thoughts under control again. But she worried about what might happen if she left the ship in this condition. And she worried about what Mogurn would say. And so she flew a little longer to see if she could straighten it out, and straighten herself out. And after a time, she managed to calm herself, and she stayed with the river image, but found smoother waters and set a steady course upon them. And though the bright warm sun did not return, the threatening storm clouds thinned into a grey canopy which reflected her feeling of melancholy, but also seemed to offer safety and stability.

At that point she readjusted the stabilizers and withdrew. As she came back to her own senses, she realized how tired she was, physically as well as emotionally. She climbed out of the rigger-station and stretched.

"Jael!"

She jumped, startled. Turning, she found herself facing a grim Deuteronomous Mogurn. "You have been rigging," he accused, his voice harsh but controlled. His eyes were lined with

blood vessels. He looked furious. She wondered how long she had been in the net; she had not expected him to be awake this soon. "What were my instructions about rigging while I was not here?" he demanded.

Jael glanced down guiltily. "You said . . . only to check on instabilities." She felt cornered; she had to defend herself. "And I . . . when I was in there, some instabilities came up, and I . . . had to deal with them."

Mogurn stroked his chin warily. "I see." He studied the external instruments for a moment. "Perhaps so. But you were in there a long time. And the readings do not look that good. They do not look that good, Jael." He stared back at her, and she could see that he was not convinced. "Are you certain you did not just decide to stay in the net for a while because you missed something else?"

Nervously, she shrugged. What's so wrong with flying the ship? she wondered. And what have you done to me, anyway, you liar? She thought of what she might have missed; she thought more than longingly of it.

Mogurn seemed to be reading her thoughts. "Did you miss the pallisp, Jael? Was that it?"

She frowned, not wanting to answer. Finally, she nodded unhappily.

"I see." Mogurn nodded, rubbing his temple. "I'm not incapable of understanding that. I'm not an insensitive man, Jael. Would you like the pallisp now?"

She tried not to look at him, but she couldn't help it. "Yes," she whispered. And as she said it, the smile that flickered across his face gave her a shiver of fear. But it didn't change her mind.

Together they left the bridge. Instead of going to the commons to eat, Mogurn ushered her toward his cabin. He told her to sit, to bend her head forward.

Jael obeyed gratefully. And in the instant that the cool sphere touched the base of her head, she knew that she had indeed been trapped; she was already enslaved to this device.

But then the warm glow of the pallisp spread through her, and she no longer cared at all.

Chapter 7

Betrayed

WHEN SHE came out of the glow this time, she felt a wave of dizziness. It took her head a few moments to clear, and when it did, she saw puffs of smoke and realized that Mogurn was sitting with his pipe, watching her. She felt a sudden rush of anger toward him, but instead of letting it show, she just smiled thinly.

The memory of the pallisp lingered in her mind, but she recalled even more vividly her last thought before the instrument had robbed her of consciousness: the thought that she had, in that moment, given up her freedom to the pallisp. And Mogurn was the master of the pallisp. She gazed at him, her stomach knotted, and she wondered if she ought to hate him for it.

"Are you feeling better now, Jael?" Mogurn inquired.

She took a breath, let it out slowly, and nodded. She was careful to keep her feelings hidden. "I think I would like to sleep now," she said. Her voice was ragged.

"Indeed. And you may. But first let me explain something to you." Mogurn puffed his pipe, and the smoke rose in a living cloud that curled toward her, stinging her nostrils. "I have just shown you compassion because I know that you acted out of . . . let us say, *ignorance* . . . when you rigged without my permission. You did it because you missed your pallisp, and you did not know how to act without it."

Jael started to nod and caught herself. Admit nothing, she thought.

"But you must know this: I will not tolerate disobedience. If it happens again, you must forfeit the pallisp—not just for one time, but perhaps altogether." He puffed his pipe, his rheumy eyes not leaving her. She tried not to flinch. "I take this sort of thing very seriously. Very seriously indeed. I trust you will, too." Puff. Puff. "If we understand one another, perhaps we can forge a working arrangement that will last." Puff.

She remained motionless. When she finally couldn't stand his stare anymore, she nodded slowly.

His heavy-lidded eyes closed and opened. "I'm pleased you understand. And now Jael . . . if you would help me . . ." He coughed suddenly on a lungful of smoke. He laid his pipe aside, frowned, and sat back. He lifted his headset over his grey-streaked hair.

Frightened, Jael rose. "But weren't you just under this a little while ago?"

"Don't question my orders!" he snapped. She stepped backward, alarmed by his tone, but he smiled woodenly and beckoned her forward again. "And now, Jael, please do me the honors. One hour will be sufficient." He closed his eyes.

She knelt and made the adjustments. Sighing, she rose and looked down at his inert form, at his fingers twitching—and she felt a rush of loathing. She also felt an appalling weariness and confusion. Mogurn had, after all, given her the chance to fly which everyone else had denied her. And the pallisp—whatever it was or did—brought her a pleasure she had never known before. Was that so bad?

She was hardly sure any longer. She was hardly sure of anything except that this flight was turning into something far different from what she had dreamed.

Mogurn was sighing and murmuring to himself, his eyes seeing nothing. Jael walked toward the door, intending to leave him to his peace, if that was what his present condition could be called. But instead of leaving, she found herself peering around Mogurn's compartment, which she had not really looked at closely since the first time she'd come in. Then she'd been so taken with the crystal tapestry, and absorbed in her own anxieties, that she'd not noticed much else. But now she peered about, surreptitiously and a little guiltily, feeling like a trespasser.

The cabin was decorated with some expensive-looking oddments of art, mostly sculpture, and in his half-open wardrobe she noted the sheen of silken, satiny cloth. She turned toward the

door again, and was startled to realize that the wall to the left of the door was a full-sized holo-screen, with controls on a panel in the corner. With a hasty glance back at Mogurn's unmoving figure, she thumbed through the holo-selection. She stopped, flushing, when she realized that at least half the titles sounded like pornography. Serves you right for prying, she thought. But as she turned once more to leave, she noticed two other items framed on the wall. She stepped over for a closer look. One was a series of holo-prints: a young dark-skinned woman with a haunted gaze, a humanoid Denedrite with intense red eyes and a pointed nose, and an incredibly pale young man with an expression as desperate and defeated-looking as that of the woman's. Jael sensed at once that all three were riggers. What else could they be? Mogurn's former riggers? What had become of them? she wondered with a shiver. She looked at the other item. It was a legal document, bearing the seal of the planetary government of Eridani Prime—a long-settled and powerful world. She scanned the text.

And suddenly had trouble breathing.

The paper was a certificate of indictment against one Deuteronomous Mogurn, in federal planetary court of Eridani Prime. The indictment listed six counts of smuggling, three counts of receipt of stolen property, and two counts of possession of illegal goods. The specifics were listed, and at the bottom of the list, under the heading of illegal goods, one word caught her eye: *pallisp*.

She blinked, staring at that word, a feeling of despair rising in her. "Damn you . . ." she whispered.

She'd never heard of a pallisp before this trip—but it was illegal on one of the most important worlds in the known galaxy. And what about the rest of this? Mogurn had been brought up on all of these charges. Or had he? Squinting at the bottom of the sheet, she saw a date and time: his scheduled hearing. Beside the date was scrawled a single exclamation: *Hah!* Trembling, she turned to look back at Mogurn, twitching and pawing himself: the man whose ship she was flying; the man who had framed his own certificate of indictment, apparently as a badge of honor. Had he escaped from that world before he could be brought to trial? It certainly helped explain his unregistered status at Gaston's Landing—not that anyone there was likely to notice, or care about, an outstanding warrant.

It could also explain Mogurn's reluctance to discuss his cargo. She'd let the question pass because he had the right to confidentiality. But now she wondered, what hadn't he wanted her to know?

Heart pounding, she crept out of the cabin. Mogurn was still inert, his head rolled to one side, his eyes closed. Leaning against the wall outside, panting, she let the door turn opaque behind her. Then she staggered into the commons room and sat and listened to the thundering of her heart and prayed, *Dear God—if there is a God—tell me what I've done!*

All she heard was the rushing and pounding of blood in her veins.

After a time, she rose and went out into the hall and stood by the ladder that led down to the engineering decks. Would it also take her to the cargo holds? She might be able to see for herself what the ship was carrying—if she had the nerve.

She stood by the open hatch, staring down into the gloom. At last she sighed painfully and turned away. She went to her cabin and locked the door, and there she brooded, huddling on her bunk in near darkness. And after a long rime, she felt her eyelids growing heavy, and eventually she curled into a tight ball and slept a sleep of exhaustion.

* * *

She confronted Mogurn at breakfast, though not immediately. She pushed some pieces of cut-up griddle cake around on her plate for a while, then said, "What is our cargo, anyway?" After waiting a moment for an answer, she realized that she had spoken too softly to be heard.

Mogurn was scratching his beard, muttering to himself as he pored over a datapad at his elbow. Jael had no idea what he was studying. She chewed a syrup-dampened bite. She started to repeat her question, then hesitated, and instead blurted, "I saw the certificate on your wall." She looked down again and stabbed another square of griddle-cake.

When she raised her eyes, Mogurn was gazing at her. She realized that he was squinting in puzzlement. She cleared her throat and started to say, "The . . . court thing—"

"What did you say?" he asked, cutting her off. "Something about my wall?"

Jael's face burned, her stomach knotted. "Your certificate," she said. "I saw it."

"My what?"

"Your—" Her throat constricted and she tried one more time, taking a deep breath. "You were indicted. You were in trouble for smuggling. And for—" Her throat tightened again, but she saw the sudden flash of understanding, and the glint of amusement in his eyes, and she was suddenly determined to speak her mind. For the pallisp, she thought. For the damn pallisp. "For possession of stolen goods," she said.

Mogurn cocked his head.

"And illegal goods. Including . . ."

"Yes?" he said in an exaggerated tone. "Including what?"

"Including . . . the pallisp."

"I see. And does that bother you?"

"Yes, it—"

"You're enjoying the pallisp, aren't you?" he interrupted. "Do you think that just because something is illegal on one world, it is therefore wrong, somehow?"

"You were . . . stealing," Jael stammered. "You were smuggling." Mogurn shrugged, making no effort to deny the charge. And, she noticed, he didn't seem to object to her having seen it. Perhaps he'd even posted it in the expectation that whatever rigger was serving him would see it.

"Actually," Mogurn said finally, turning off his datapad, "all you know is that I was charged with those things. You don't know that I was guilty of any of them." He smiled placidly and stroked his beard, as though tempting her to respond.

"I don't hear you denying it," Jael said hotly.

"True," he admitted. He raised his dark eyebrows. "Would you like me to deny it?"

Jael tried to control her anger. What happened to your last rigger? she wanted to ask, but couldn't voice the words. She wanted to rage at him; she was so tightly coiled, so angry that she didn't know how to answer. "I would like to know," she said coldly, giving each word measured emphasis, "where you got the pallisp. And what it is doing to me."

Mogurn smoothed down the front of his navy blue satin shirt and pulled together the front of the violet-trimmed vesta that hung loosely around his shoulders. His eyes came to a focus, and he pressed his palms together in front of his lips to hide a frown. "Of course. What shall I tell you? That it is a medical instrument? That it is utterly safe when used with knowledge and care?" As he gazed at her, his eyes seemed to be intently gauging her response.

"Medical instrument?" she muttered, trusting him less than ever.

"Yes, of course." Mogurn tipped his head to one side. "Well, psych-med, actually. It is said to have certain uses in the treatment of, for example, severe depression."

Then why are you using it on me? she wanted to shout.

"I find, however, that many people enjoy its use." Mogurn steepled his forefingers, interlocking his hands in front of his face. "It must be used with caution, of course. There are those who would tell you it is . . . addictive, who are terrified by that thought, and I . . . well, I do not accept such claims. It is simply a question of using it correctly."

"Addictive?" she whispered, so softly he could not have heard.

"There is no reason to fear it. After all, the pallisp brings pleasure, does it not?" Mogurn's voice softened. "Don't we all enjoy the sensation of pleasure? Pure pleasure, unadulterated by the

complications that muddy our lives, the petty jealousies and guilt that rob us of whatever grim joys fate brings into our lives?" His gruff voice became almost delicate. "Isn't that something that all people should have the right to enjoy? Even riggers? Shouldn't riggers have that right, too, Jael?"

Jael swallowed; she had no idea how to answer anymore. Perhaps there was some truth in his words, but she was speechless with anger at the way she'd been manipulated. Speechless with fear. And with, even now, an almost overwhelming desire to go under the pallisp again. To feel the warm caress of its presence within her mind, and the tickling suggestion of love and companionship against her soul. To feel the golden light of that inner sun—

"Is there anything else you wanted to discuss, Jael?"

Startled, she tried to think. *Yes! What about the theft, the smuggling . . . ?* None of the words made it to her lips.

Mogurn had risen to his feet. "We do, after all, have flying to do. A ship to bring into port." His brusque hurry-up tone had returned. "If you've finished with your breakfast . . ." He gestured impatiently as he turned to leave the commons.

Despite the knot in her stomach, Jael swallowed a large piece of syrup-drenched griddlecake and drained her cup of coffee. Sliding her dishes into the disposal unit, she glumly followed Mogurn to the bridge.

* * *

"Why don't you want me here while you fly?" Mogurn turned from his instruments and peered at her darkly. In the gloom of the cockpit, his eyes looked angry and threatening.

"It's that—" Jael bit her lip "—it's that it makes me nervous sometimes. It makes it hard for me to keep the flow stable, to keep the impressions clean, and clear." She drew a breath. "I can rig better when I know I'm not being watched. When I can feel alone, and safe."

"Safe?" Mogurn said in a tone of surprise. "Safe? Have I ever threatened you, Jael?"

Jael shook her head. "No, but I . . . well . . . that's all I can tell you. I feel safer, and I feel better, when I'm alone here." She pressed her lips together and forced herself to stare back at Mogurn. She had very few strengths to command against the ship's owner, but this was one of them: she could make any reasonable request that bore on the safety of the ship or her ability to rig, and expect it to be granted. Without her flying skills, Mogurn would never see planetfall again.

Arms folded across his heavy chest, Mogurn studied her with his dark, stem gaze, keeping her frozen as she stared back at him. At last he released her from his gaze. "Very well," he said. He glanced at the instruments one more time, then indicated the rigger-station with a tilt of his head. "Go ahead and take the net. Don't tire yourself." With that, he turned, his silken robe spinning in folds, and strode from the bridge. The door darkened to opacity behind him, leaving Jael alone in the gloomy compartment.

Does he distrust me now? Jael thought, staring after him. Do I care? She turned and repeated the inspection of the instruments that Mogurn had just made, and then she climbed into the rigger-station. She stretched out and gazed up at the monitors, and closed her eyes and tried to relax, to forget about Mogurn and the pallisp, to think only of the ship, and the Flux.

Her senses darkened and sprang outward, into the net.

Chapter 8

The Mountain Route

SHE FLEW through a vast and clear, purplish sky. She floated like a seed high over a strangely glowing blue- and green-mottled landscape. The net glittered faintly around her, binding her to the invisible ghost of the spaceship. She spread her arms, and in the net they billowed outward as great sail-like wings, filled with a rising updraft of wind. Jael rose, soaring.

The landscape beneath her was an odd matrix of color, reflecting her mood, her uncertainty. It was a phantasmagorical land, bubbling with distant flame red volcanoes, and glinting rivers of silver threading through cyan valleys and shadowy plains. This was not a landscape in which she could imagine anyone living, certainly no one human. It took her a while to calm down from her confrontation with Mogurn; but eventually her feelings quieted, if they did not disappear altogether, and she flew silently through empty skies, lost in the sort of daydream in which no thought lasted for more than a moment or two, and few images lingered.

She felt a sort of wistful melancholy. She did not pursue any of the concerns that had so recently preoccupied her. Whatever worries she had about Mogurn and the pallisp did not need to reach her here, in this haven from all worries. At least that was her hope. She flew slowly on the wind, not bothering to seek out faster currents. Whether they reached their destination sooner, or later, did not matter to her. Hours went by, and she remained content to float, to drift.

Occasionally, despite her efforts at detachment, the landscape below shimmered and flared in response to tremors that surfaced within her own heart, aches that she was determined to leave unnamed. They were longings and fears that she wanted desperately to leave behind, that she was determined not to allow expression. But she was not always the master of those feelings. Whether she willed it or not, they sometimes erupted into the landscape—sometimes with unfocused phosphorescent fire among the hills, sometimes with tiny billowing bloody plumes, sometimes in the form of shadows dancing over the land like the dark ghosts of aerial acrobats. Those aches were always present within her, and when they found their way out, the landscape always responded.

She began to wish she could change the image and leave this heartache landscape behind. But it was a tenacious image, with a powerful hold on her. However her abilities were growing, whether it was through experience, or through exposure to the pallisp, her imaginative powers remained many-sided. She was not immune to darker visions.

The com-signal chimed in her consciousness, and Mogurn's voice broke into her solitude. *Jael, what's wrong? The feedback out here looks poor. It looks unstable.*

The landscape turned to brimstone and filled the sky with a rising, burning haze. She tried to control it, to subdue the sudden eruption of anger at the sound of Mogurn's voice. *Nothing's wrong. Everything's fine,* she answered curtly.

Are you sure? Mogurn's voice was a growl in one corner of her mind. She envisioned him on the bridge, squinting anxiously down into the rigger-station, leering at her still form. His voice was bodiless here in the net, but she was sure that physically he must be very near. She had to work hard not to lose her equilibrium. She countered an instinctive urge to avoid him by retreating to the extremities of the net; that wouldn't help.

I'm fine, she insisted. The image was showing signs of disintegration. The outer edges of the landscape looked unfocused, almost frayed. Mogurn's interference was creating a potentially hazardous situation. The ship was beginning to shake in the turbulence. Mogurn might not have been able to feel it inside, but here in the net there was no mistaking it. Jael drew more energy from the flux-pile, trying to stabilize the image.

I'm depending on you, said Mogurn.

I know. Now please leave me alone to do my job!

Very well. I'll be back to check later.

Jael didn't respond. She thought hard, searching her imagination for something that would help her to stabilize this situation. She focused on the angry horizon, aware that her focusing power was indeed stronger. Had the pallisp really aided her? The colors at the horizon bled, and a crimson sunset swelled over the mountains off to what she envisioned as the northwest.

Mountains. She was startled by the realization. The mountains she and Mogurn had talked about: the ones that he wanted her to skirt. She'd felt their presence from afar; it had just been a question of when she would reach them and what form they would take—and how, or whether, she would skirt them. The route through the mountains was the more direct one to their destination, Lexis, and just now she was feeling inclined to bring this flight to an end as quickly as possible. But there were reports, and not just Mogurn's warnings, that the mountain route was more dangerous, with tricky currents. And, of course, dragons.

Jael smiled at the thought. That, of course, was what Mogurn was worried about: the legends in the rigging community—and that's all they were, legends—which held that dragons lived in these mountain routes along the fringes of Aeregian space. They were real dragons, according to the legends, fire-breathing dragons that lived in the Flux as humans lived and breathed in air. There had been some discussion of the subject back in rigger school, where it had been treated about as seriously as the legends of the "ghost rigger ships," the lost "Flying Dutchman" ships of interstellar space. No instructor could swear that the dragons did not exist, objectively speaking, but one knew well enough what they thought. Dragons made for vivid and wonderful stories, but not one teacher or rigger in a hundred believed that they were real.

Still, the rumors persisted as rumors do: riggers in the starports boasting, telling tales of dueling with dragons. And not just dueling, but conversing. Still, Jael gave even less credence to the boasts of riggers than she did to the carefully disclaimed references in school. So far as she knew, there was no real evidence for believing that *anything* actually lived in the mountains—or, for that matter, anywhere else in the Flux. But according to the library hypnos, there did seem to be a special quality to the Flux in this corridor that almost demanded mountain imagery in the minds of passing riggers; and sometimes it evoked dragons, as well, or images of dragons. Maybe some riggers believed the dragons to be actual living inhabitants of the Flux, but Jael had never met anyone with firsthand knowledge. The library nav-hypnos described them simply as unusually compelling images. Of course, that didn't mean they were harmless. Even imaginary dragons could threaten a ship, if they were vivid enough in a rigger's mind. Either way, it sounded dangerous to pass that way. It sounded glorious.

And that was why Mogurn had warned her away, she was sure. Still, he had not absolutely forbidden her to fly in the mountains—and after all, she was the rigger, wasn't she? It was she, not Mogurn, who chose the images and the streams of the Flux to ride. He could suggest a route, but the ultimate choice was hers. And what did her senses tell her now?

Stretching the focus of her vision, she tried to spy out the distant range. There was still turbulence from her confused emotions; she could distinguish only the general rise and fall of the mountain peaks. She would have to move in closer to see anything useful. And that might not be such a bad thing to do, despite Mogurn's fears. The greater demands of close-in flying would help her to focus, help her to discipline her imagination.

She banked slightly to angle in that direction. The net sparkled around her as she grew excited—at the thought of quickening the flight, at the thought of danger. Perhaps she shouldn't really do this, not if the danger had become an attraction for her. But there were times when one simply had to take charge, to do things for one's own sake. Mogurn's fears be damned, she thought.

Abruptly she transformed herself into a mountain eagle, and she caught a new current and soared northwest, pulse racing, net glittering like jewels in the Flux.

* * *

Ahead was twilight, emerging from sunset. Mountains stood jagged and black against a wine red sky that deepened into evening. The mountains were much closer now, more fully revealed to her awareness. She scanned ahead with just the slightest feeling of unease, using the edges of her mind to explore the approaching shadows. Would there be dragons? She doubted it; still, there was no way to know absolutely. And she had not yet decided whether she would actually violate Mogurn's request.

A sense of quiet anticipation settled in as she flew on eagle wings ever closer to the range of peaks. A part of her almost hoped that dragons would appear—if for no other reason than to ease her loneliness.

The com-signal chimed again, chilling her.

Isn't it time you came out? asked a bodiless Mogurn.

A sudden crosswind made her shiver. *Is it?* she asked, stalling.

You've been in there for hours, Jael. Too long.

Really? It doesn't seem that long.

What's the matter, Jael? Don't you want to come out?

She hesitated, torn by conflicting desires. He would be waiting to give her the pallisp, she knew. But this was not a good place to leave the net unattended, not with the mountains approaching. *It might not be safe to leave right now,* she said finally.

Not safe? Why not?

She spread her wings to catch a warm updraft. *Because . . . there might be dragons.*

His eyes squinted furiously, or so she imagined. *Dragons? Dragons? Jael, have you taken the mountain route?*

Jael beat her eagle wings with sharp strokes. *Yes. That is—no, not exactly. But we're near there.*

Find a stretch of safe passage. And then you come out and see me in my cabin, Jael. His voice touched her like ice, and she stopped pumping her wings. His anger made her tremble. She saw distant lightning among the peaks, reflecting her sudden fear.

All right, she whispered, and the world suddenly seemed even colder and lonelier. She did not want to leave here to face him, of all people. But neither did she want to lose the pallisp tonight.

You should have thought of that before, she thought.

Banking left, she brought the ship into a heading that would take it parallel to the range, if there were no unexpected shifts in the wind. She thought she could probably safely leave the net here. Still, she delayed leaving—gliding in a gentle breeze, watching ominous dark peaks drift past, far off to the starboard. She wished that somehow the fear and the loneliness would subside.

Finally, when she could no longer justify staying, she set the stabilizers and the alarms. Her senses melted back into her body as she withdrew from the net, and she opened her eyes, blinking, half expecting to see Mogurn squinting in at her. But the bridge was deserted, gloomy and lonely. There was nothing here to greet her but the instruments, and for that she was grateful.

She stretched as she stood beside the rigger-station. She realized for the first time that she was hungry. And tired; her limbs were heavy with fatigue. She wasn't sure which she wanted more, sleep or food. But Mogurn had said to come immediately. Sighing, she left the friendly gloom of the bridge and went to Mogurn's door. She pressed the signal. The door paled and she stepped inside.

Mogurn was seated, smoking his long pipe. His eyes betrayed nothing of his thoughts. He rose and silently gestured for her to sit. She slid onto the bench-seat, conscious of the crystal tapestry twinkling over her head, wishing she could spin around and disappear into that miniature world of light and refraction. Mogurn frowned, studying the end of his smoking pipe.

The smoke curled toward her, stretching out like a vaporous hand. "Why did you disobey me?" he asked.

Jael shivered, certain now that she would be denied the pallisp. Perhaps that was for the better, but she could not see it that way now; all she could see was the relief and the warmth that the pallisp could bring to her. "I . . . meant no disobedience," she murmured, shamefully aware that it was only half true. Yes, he had not strictly forbidden her to fly that route, but of course she had been aware of his desires and had—yes—rather relished ignoring them. Had quietly relished his fear of the mountains—his fear, she presumed, of dragons that almost certainly were not real.

Mogurn stepped closer, hovering over her, alternately blocking and exposing the light behind him. Jael squinted nervously up at him. "Did I not say that I preferred the longer route, Jael? Was there some special circumstance you haven't told me of, some need to take the more perilous course?"

Was that fear in his voice? No. He was the master. Jael bit her lip. "I . . . was having trouble, the other way. But this way it was clearer. And I wasn't worried. I think, well, the stories about . . . dragons . . . are just stories. I don't consider them real."

"Oh?" Mogurn glared at her with his bloodshot eyes. "Tell me, Jael—what is *real* to a rigger? Can you tell me that? Is it what is in the Flux—or what is in the rigger's mind?" He drew a lungful of smoke and exhaled it as he spoke. "It doesn't matter, Jael—either one can destroy us."

Jael met his stare for a moment, then nodded mutely.

"And, drunken sods though most riggers may be," he added bitterly, "one should never laugh at their reports, should one?"

Her face burned at his sarcasm. "No. But still, it's just legend!"

"Is that it, Jael? Just legend? When riggers report what they have *seen* and felt, is that just legend?"

Jael shrugged. How many riggers, she wondered, had actually reported dragons? Not many, she was sure. But she said nothing.

"Now, are we still close enough to our original course to turn back onto it?" He exhaled another cloud of smoke, which drifted past her face before being drawn into the ventilators. Jael opened her mouth to reply in the affirmative, but something made the words stick in her throat. Instead, she shook her head. "We can't avoid the mountains?" he growled. She shook her head again, with greater determination. Mogurn stared at her, drawing smoke from his pipe and exhaling it in repeated large plumes. Finally he turned away in silence.

Jael watched as he laid his pipe on the reading table and returned to her, pallisp in his hand. "All right. It is time." His voice held no kindness, nor did his eyes. But the sight of the pallisp sent a thrill down Jael's spine. Unhappiness and loneliness welled up in her; she hated the realization, but she was shivering in anticipation of the joy that would come from the thing.

At Mogurn's gesture, she bent her head forward and pushed her hair aside. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mogurn's arm reach, saw the pallisp gleam . . . and felt the cool touch of the probe. She felt the pallisp's warmth reaching into her with shimmering energy; felt that warmth encircling the ugly, waiting feelings of alienation, fear, anger; felt it closing around those feelings like flowing blood, healing and soothing and transforming the emotions, softening her inner defenses and filling her with the warmth of joy and love . . .

The wave turned icy cold. Jael swayed dizzily as a tide of fear and dread welled up inside her, sweeping away all other feelings. For a moment, she was disoriented as well as frightened. Her thoughts were flooded with pain and confusion. Then she realized—the pallisp was gone. She sat back, blinking wildly, struggling to hold back a rush of tears. As Mogurn spoke, she could hardly see him through blurred eyes; but he had stepped away from her, and she could see the glint of the pallisp in his hand. "That's all for tonight, Jael. You must understand what obedience means, even for a rigger." Jael tried not to tremble under his gaze, but she was desperate with frustration and need, and helplessness. Slowly, and with great effort, she steadied

herself, drew herself upright into a semblance of dignity. Mogurn nodded. "Now, Jael, help me with my augmentor. Then you may retire."

Though dying to scream, she obeyed. Mogurn reclined and she fitted the synaptic augmentor to his head and adjusted the controls, and when Mogurn was reduced to a silent figure fluttering his hands and pawing himself with a blind-eyed grin, she backed away and fled to her cabin.

* * *

Her thoughts seemed to roam about the cabin like birds on wing against a distant sky. Her cabin was at once a boundless space in which she felt tiny and insignificant, and a grim claustrophobic cell, threatening to crush her. She stalked the little room like a caged animal, brooding.

The question kept coming back at her: why had Mogurn done this to her? Why use a device that would make her addicted? Was there any doubt that he had known what would happen? What had he wanted, a rigger who was so dependent upon him that she would never leave unless dismissed? It seemed likely. She thought of the pictures she had seen in his cabin, the haunting despair in the eyes of those riggers. Am I that far gone? she wondered. Could she leave him now? Would she have the courage, if given the opportunity?

And what about his promise of heightened sensitivity in the net? Was that a lie, too? She had felt *something*, to be sure; but was it truly an improvement in sensitivity, or was it just an altered coloration of perception? It might well have been real; indeed perhaps that was another of his goals—to have, not just a rigger-servant, but one who could sense the realm more keenly, and perhaps fly faster and more stealthily in the service of his smuggling activities. But at what cost to her mind, to her soul?

She peered at her reflection in the mirror and tried to decide if there was anything different in her own face. Did she look thinner, more worn? More experienced, more capable? She pushed her fingers back through her hair, and exhaled deeply. Lord, how she wanted . . . how she *needed* the pallisp! How she wanted it to take this lonely bitterness from her soul and turn it into something warm. She would almost kill for that. But only Mogurn knew precisely how to use the thing, and so she needed Mogurn, too.

Maybe, she thought, a mist-bath would make her feel better. Checking that her door was locked, she shrugged out of her clothes and stepped into the tiny mist cubicle. She elbowed the start button, and closed her eyes as the mist issued from the walls and surrounded her with a warm swirling dampness. Sighing, she allowed the mist to gently scrub her clean, and she blinked as the droplets dispersed, leaving her skin tingling. She tentatively ran her hands down her body. She inhaled the moist ionized air, savoring the physical refreshment. As she stepped out, she grabbed a towel and rubbed herself down. Then she pulled some loose-fitting clothes out of a drawer and slipped into them. Though she intended to sleep, she felt safer dressed.

She sat cross-legged on her bunk, thinking, feeling the weight of her worries pressing down upon her again. She began to think of her father, to wonder if he had done things like this to riggers in his employ. She drew her knees up under her chin, thinking of Dap, whom she had trusted. Sighing, she switched off the light and stretched out, and after a moment turned on the sleep-field to lift her gently, not quite off the surface of the bunk, to help her sleep.

And then she tossed and writhed, unable to rest at all. Unable to stop thinking. To stop her anger at Mogurn. To stop remembering Gaston's Landing, where her unhappiness had been so great that it had driven her to accept this instead. To stop remembering Dap . . . and that night, and the dreamlink . . .

* * *

His willful insistence, his gentle but deliberate deception, promising intimacy and understanding; she remembered the offer of friendship, and his eyes dark and earnest, and his vow: "We'll be looking right into each other, and our souls will link . . ."

And the golden glow of the dreamlink, and the warmth and the seduction . . . and the opening up of her heart and memory . . . and the devastating awareness of Dap's reaction to her need; his revulsion and his fleeing . . .

And her own muted cry of pain, which she had wrapped about herself and forced back in, bottling it so it could no longer hurt her . . .

And going back to the hall, determined to get an assignment . . . and meeting Mogurn, who had offered her the job—and the pallisp.

* * *

She started out of a brooding daze, in the near-darkness of her cabin. One small light was glowing at its lowest setting. Obviously, sleep was impossible. She could not forget the pallisp, or the cruel way in which Mogurn had torn it from her. But the pallisp was the only thing that could soothe away these anxieties and fears. It was her only release.

Except, of course, for the net.

Sitting up, she thought about that for a long time. She could go to the net now, of course. That was the one place where she could shape her feelings and play them out in images and render them harmless. Letting dark feelings loose there could be perilous, but was it any less perilous to keep them corked inside herself until they exploded? Mogurn had already warned her once; he would be furious if she went to the net again while he was under his bliss-wire. But if she didn't do something, she would go crazy.

She sat for a very long time, weighing the consequences. The longer she thought, the faster her heart beat, the more it cried out with need. *Damn it, you have to do something!* She could not have the pallisp. There was only one other way out of this.

You are the rigger. You have the power and the need.

Swallowing, she rose from her bunk. And she stood there, swaying, trying to find some resolve that would keep her from returning to the net . . . that would allow her to sleep, or if not to sleep, then at least to bear the pain and the need.

She didn't find the resolve. She found only the need.

Chapter 9

Highwing

SHE CREPT onto the bridge and slipped silently into the rigger-cell. The neural contacts touched her neck. Her senses, electrified, sprang into the net.

Her imagination at once sparked a new image: the ship was a balloon-borne gondola in a nighttime sky, riding the winds downrange of a long line of mountain peaks. Jael let the breeze soothe her. After a time, she changed altitude, seeking higher crosswinds that would take her closer to the mountains. She wasn't sure why she was doing it. Revenge against Mogurn for the way he had treated her? Or was it that she was already being punished, and what more could happen to her? Or was it that she really was taking charge, and this simply felt like the right direction to fly? She didn't know. The gondola swayed as she passed through an air stream moving the wrong way; then she found another that carried her in the direction she wanted.

She set her sights upon the approaching range. A single full, creamy moon sank slowly toward jagged black peaks, jutting like sullen teeth against the horizon. Backlit by the moon, a blunt-nosed mass of clouds was moving out of the mountains toward her. She liked the effect: the gloom of night and eerily lighted clouds that looked like moving glaciers. Or like bold angry pincers that could reach out to shred her balloon . . .

The balloon disintegrated abruptly. She caught at the air with her hands. For a moment, she and the starship tumbled earthward, her arms flailing and grasping; then she overcame her panic and deliberately remade the image. The ghostly net shimmered and became a varnished wooden glider, whispering in the wind as it sliced downward through the air. She was perched astride its fuselage, and she tugged and pulled at the airfoils until it leveled out in flight. And she thought: Take care! Dangerous thoughts could smash the ship into splinters as well as any physical force, and the pieces would be left to drift forever in the currents of this strange reality, the Flux.

The wind soothed her face, and gradually soothed her mind and her spirit as well. She let her feelings swirl ahead of her in the sky, in the emptiness between her and the clouds far ahead. Her feelings would not hurt her out there. Let them dissipate in the cool emptiness.

Time passed and she drew steadily closer to the mountain range.

* * *

The dragons stormed out of the clouds in random formation, like gulls out of a rain squall.

Jael stared out into the moonlit night in astonishment. Dragons! Dreadful winged shapes, they wheeled before the distant clouds. Sparks of red flame flickered about them. Jael could scarcely believe the sight before her. Dragons couldn't be real! They were something from fairy tales and primal dreams, from racial fears and magical desires . . . from lies fabricated by boastful or delirious riggers. But . . . *there were dragons* in the sky right now. And several of them were flying toward her.

Jael searched her thoughts, wondering if she might have provoked this image from her own imagination. She felt nothing, not even the slightest tingle of recognition. Was it possible that the dragons actually were real . . . living creatures, living in the Flux? She controlled the glider with tight movements and watched them come.

The dragons grew in the moonlight. They certainly appeared real enough: rugged, fierce-looking creatures, breathing fire into the air like the dragons of folklore. Most of them banked away to soar and circle far off her wingtips. She felt a moment of relief. But three of the creatures closed to intercept her, circling into a tight orbit around her glider. They maneuvered quickly, banking and veering, their movements hard to follow.

One swooped close, startling her, but giving her a good glimpse of its features. It was solid

all right, its scales like polished pewter gleaming in the moonlight, but with subtle colors rippling beneath the surface. The creature's head was rough hewn, as though of living stone. Its nostrils flared coal red as it craned its neck toward her; its eyes shone with ghostly green light. Its wings were broad and serrated, beating the air powerfully. As it circled around behind her, another dragon swept directly across her path, alarmingly close; then all three drew off to a more comfortable distance.

She held her course, thinking frantically. What was one supposed to do when met by dragons? Storytellers in the spacebars spoke of dueling. Could it be that those tales were not just boastful nonsense? These dragons looked real, and fierce, and eager for battle!

This one is mine, she imagined she heard a voice say.

She shivered, wishing she had flown another way.

Are you afraid? she heard, and this time she knew she really had heard it.

She glanced around, frightened, thinking that perhaps Mogurn was on the bridge, taunting her in punishment for her disobedience. But the voice, though it murmured in her head, was not Mogurn's.

You are afraid, said the voice. *Shall we be kind, and kill you quickly?*

It was one of the dragons speaking! She was terrified and astounded. She glanced over her left shoulder and discovered one of them flying close alongside, just a little behind her. Its gleaming eyes and smoldering nostrils were as clear as marker lights. *What do you want?* she asked, her voice trembling.

The dragon exhaled a plume of flame, startling her. It edged closer, its eyes flickering like green lanterns. She banked to the right, thinking, This can't be happening! The dragon drew even closer as she veered, following her movements with ease. Its eyes glowed brightly, emerald green. The turbulence from its wings buffeted her, and she had to fight to control the glider. *What are you doing?* she cried in protest. *Leave me alone!*

The dragon puffed a cloud of sparks. *Does that mean you don't want me to kill you straightaway?* It dropped back . . . and then, with a powerful series of wingstrokes, flew up in a tight loop around her, peering closely at her as it banked and dived. Moments later, it was once more flanking her left side. *Do you prefer to die in battle?*

No! Jael cried. *I want you to leave me alone! Who are you, and why are you doing this? What do you want from me?* She hunched low on the glider, drawing the net in close around the edges.

Child! called the dragon. *What a strange one! Do they send child-spirits to duel with us? Such questions! You want to know who I am, and—*

I am not a child!

The dragon's harsh laughter filled the air.

And you haven't answered me! she added fearfully.

Nor shall I, said the dragon. *But so many questions not to answer, all at once! Do you think you're the first outsider to come here, spoiling for a fight?*

Jael gaped at the creature. *Then it's true, about the dueling! And you dragons . . . are real!*

The dragon made a noise that might have been a sigh or a snarl. *Of course! Now duel, rigger!* With deft wingstrokes, it climbed high above her; then, dropping one wing, it dived. It bore down upon her in the moonlight, its massive shape growing large, larger—

Jael screamed.

The dragon thundered as it dropped past, raking her with fire. Jael's skin sizzled, and flames crackled along the wings of her glider. Gasping, she changed the image: a sudden flurry of snow cooled her and quenched the flood of energy in the net. She changed the glider from wood to a fireproof alloy.

The dragon approached from the side, flapping its wings slowly. It eyed her with a glowing eye. *Not badly done, for a demon*, it conceded. It banked away and put distance between them.

Jael stared after the dragon, dumbfounded. Before she could gather her thoughts to reply, it

turned again and streaked toward her in another attack.

Jael froze, helpless. She tried to make herself small, to protect her flanks. The dragon grew with terrifying speed. *STOP IT!* she screamed.

The dragon broke off its attack, veering away in surprise. *And you wonder what I'm doing?* it murmured. It circled back, warily. *There is something different about you, rigger. What is it?* In the distant moonlit clouds, the dragon's fellows looked like small dots, wheeling and maneuvering in the air. The dragon glanced at the others, with what looked like uncertainty. *If you didn't want to duel, why did you come here?*

Struggling to keep her glider steady, Jael was dizzy with confusion, with fear and anxiety. *Well, I . . . don't know. But I wasn't expecting anyone to try to kill me!*

The dragon banked closer. *And just what did you expect?*

I don't know, she admitted, and wondered why, indeed, she had come into this mountain range. She thought, but didn't say, that she hadn't really been expecting dragons or any other living thing to be here.

The dragon snorted, then spoke in an almost conciliatory tone. *You don't know what you expected, but you didn't expect to duel. What, then? Do you want to talk? Do you want to just fly along and chat lightheartedly? We could do that, I suppose. I could promise not to kill you.*

Jael drew a breath. *Can I believe that?*

Why not?

She eyed the dragon, unable to tell whether it was mocking her or not. *Can we really just talk? No dueling?*

The dragon tipped its head and winked its luminous eye. Jael nodded uneasily. She didn't know what to make of this creature, but she knew she didn't want to fight it. She decided to change her image again: the glider disappeared and she became a winged pony, beating into the wind. *Very nice*, said the dragon, drawing in close alongside her.

She didn't answer. The night was changing, the clouds closing in. She could no longer see the other dragons. A moonbeam broke through the clouds to show a jagged mountain slope, very near, with mist swirling around it. Jael had not realized that they were so close to the mountains. *Do you know where we're going?* she asked.

Yes, said the dragon with a crafty chuckle. Suddenly it sideslipped over her and seized her with its great talons. Jael's breath went out with a gasp. The dragon bent its head down to peer at her between its forelegs. Its jaws gaped, and its hot breath rushed over her. Jael struggled, terrified. She squirmed and twisted and managed to roll forward in the dragon's grip just enough to kick up with her hind pony legs. Her hooves caught the dragon squarely in the stomach and it wheezed, releasing her. Jael tumbled in midair, beating frantically with her wings but losing altitude. She was dropping headfirst through the mists. She glimpsed terrifying sawtoothed slopes rushing upward to meet her. Frantically she transformed herself into a hawk, warped her wings sharply, and pulled herself out of the dive. She climbed again toward a safe altitude, looking around in vain for the dragon.

Well done, it said, right behind her.

Panicked, she looped up and into inverted flight and twisted back down behind the dragon. *You liar!* she shouted. *You promised and you lied!*

The dragon glanced back over its shoulder. *Well, I didn't exactly promise—*

You as good as promised! Is that a dragon's kind of honor?

Well—the dragon said hesitantly—where demons are concerned—

You mean you all lie? she screamed.

Only when dueling riggers! the dragon snapped—and what it did next, she could hardly believe. One moment it was in front of her, and the next it was above her, and then behind; and it curled its wing around her like a net and scooped her toward the mountain. Jael trembled and fluttered, a frightened bird, as they plummeted through the darkness. Abruptly the dragon

lurched to a landing on a black outcropping of rock. Holding her loosely, it craned its neck to sniff at her with huge smoldering nostrils, to peer at her with its enormous glowing eyes.

Jael fought to control her fear and rage. Shaking, she puffed up her hawk feathers and stared back up at the creature. *You lied, and now you intend to kill me! Is that it?*

The dragon cocked its monstrous head slowly. *I didn't actually lie, you know. I tricked. One is expected to do that with demon-spirits. Didn't they tell you that when they sent you here?*

No one sent me! Jael snapped. *I just came! And not to duel! And I'm not a demon! Why do you keep calling me that?* She choked in the dragon's breath; the air around her was suffocating, trapped by the creature's great wing. *Would you mind letting me breathe?*

Hissing, the dragon opened its wing. *You certainly are different from any rigger I've ever heard of. Not that I've personally met any before, mind you. Until now, I wasn't even sure that your kind really existed. Perhaps you had better show yourself as you really are.*

The world remained wreathed in fog, but the cool night air revived her somewhat. *All right.* Concentrating, she transformed herself back into the image of Jael LeBrae, human woman, in the nexus of a ghostly neural-sensory net. Haloing the net was a shimmering ethereal spaceship.

Impressive, said the dragon. *Is that all you, or are you riding some sort of magical beast? What do you call it? A spaceship?*

She made the spaceship disappear, wondering how many like it the dragons in these mountains had destroyed. She stood on the outcropping of rock, lonely and frightened and cold. *My name is Jael LeBrae,* she said.

She felt a shudder, as though an earthquake were shaking the rock at her feet. The dragon's eyes opened wide. It gazed at her in astonishment, then reared its head back and roared in dismay. Its cry was deafening, reverberating through the mountains and the mist. *I did not ask your name!* it bellowed. *Why have you given me your name!* It blew a searing gout of fire up into the night, and scratched at the rock, its talons grating horribly against the stone.

What's the matter? Jael cried, covering her ears. *Have you gone mad?*

What's the matter? the dragon thundered. *What's the matter? What are you? You're no demon! Demons don't give names! They never give names! Don't you know anything, rigger?*

Of course I'm not a demon! Why did you think I was? What kind of insanity is this? The ground continued to tremble at her feet. What was going on here?

The dragon was clearly disturbed by the vibration, too. It tipped its craggy head this way and that, then angled a troubled gaze at her. *Rigger, this is strange. Most strange, indeed.* It muttered to itself for a moment, as though weighing contradictory thoughts. *It is almost as if you were—but no.* It shook its head. *I'm sure that is impossible. Impossible!* Angrily, as though frustrated, it vented flame and sparks from its nostrils.

What are you talking about? Jael demanded.

Never mind, the dragon snarled. It snorted out another blast of flame. *Tell me, rigger—don't you know the power of names? You act so innocent! Names are everything! I cannot kill you for a demon, knowing your name. You are—and he growled a guttural word—garkkondoh—and fumed, a person! You are real!* Its throat rumbled like a volcano threatening to explode.

Of course I'm real! Jael shouted. *You're not making any sense at all! What do you mean, names are everything?*

The dragon shook its head unhappily. Finally it settled down enough to speak, its voice quiet in her mind. *Perhaps that was an exaggeration. Nothing is everything. But—and it fixed her with its glowing, glowering gaze, before continuing grudgingly—I perceive, I am afraid, that there is more to you than meets the eye. I had not expected such an action from a dem—from a rigger.* It glared in thought for a long moment, then sighed rumblingly, shaking its head. *Perhaps, though . . . I should have. It would seem that I am obliged now by honor—it sighed again—or perhaps by more than honor—to give you my name in return. And then I will no longer be able to trick you, or to duel without—and he made another guttural sound—hakka, cause.*

Jael ground her teeth. *What are you talking about? Never mind! I don't even want to know your name!*

The dragon settled down glumly. *And I shall have to learn more about you. Very well. If it must be. I am Windrush-Wingtouch-Highwing—Terror-of-the-Last-Peak.*

I don't want to know! she snapped.

I suppose you may call me Highwing. You might as well know that my name is of some note in the realm. And I am the sire of the four fastest young dragons in the whole of—

You are a braggart, also, Jael interrupted, startling the dragon into silence. It shifted its position awkwardly; the crag was small, compared to the dragon, and there was hardly any room left over for a frail human. That, Jael thought, was as good a reason as any to take her leave. *Look, I only want to be on with my flight,* she informed him. *You've been . . . most enlightening. But this isn't helping me reach my destination. I'm afraid I must leave now.*

Leave? Highwing rumbled. *That is impossible!*

Why?

Well—that is to say—you must make up your mind! The dragon scrutinized her with large, luminous eyes. *You really didn't come here to duel?*

I told you. No.

Highwing vented smoke, squinting. *In that case, it must be that you have come here for . . . another reason. I am troubled by this, rigger. Jael LeBrae. I am . . . troubled . . . by the meaning of this. And by you.*

By me? she murmured. And she realized, but with only a dizzy half-awareness, that his eyes were shining hypnotically into hers. She wanted to turn away, but could not; there was a terrible magnetism in his gaze. She became aware of a strange sensation in herself, as though she had turned transparent, as though the dragon were seeing much more of her than the surface manifestation she intended to show. *What are you doing to me?* she whispered.

There seemed to be a rush and a hiss around her, a flurry of activity that she could not see.

She may well be the one, said a voice—not the dragon's.

She tried to focus, to see who was speaking. She could not move her gaze.

That is easy for you to say. That was Highwing's voice, barely audible. *Do you know the trouble it would cause? Who am I to make such a claim?*

You must judge that yourself, whispered the other. *But remember the words. Remember Skytouch.*

There was a long pause. Then Highwing: *I remember Skytouch very well.* There was renewed anger in the dragon's voice.

Do you? It would not always seem so, from your actions.

Iffling, speak to me not of things that are not your affair! hissed the dragon. *Begone!* And with those words, he blinked, releasing Jael from his gaze.

She drew a deep breath and shook her head, trying to refocus her eyes. Something small and luminous and ghostly, hardly more than a flicker of light, floated in the air beside the dragon. As *you wish,* spoke the voice that she had heard moments ago. And the flicker of light vanished. Jael stared, dumbfounded, into the dark air where it had been. She looked slowly back at Highwing.

Aahhhhhh . . . the dragon sighed, steam trailing from his nostrils. *There will be unhappiness about this, that is certain. Great unhappiness.* He stared at her for a long moment.

What was that? she asked.

What was what?

That thing I just saw.

Oh. The iffling. The dragon sharpened a foreclaw on the rock. *Meddling creature. Still, I may have erred in sending it away so soon. But its words . . .* Highwing hesitated.

Troubled you, Jael said sarcastically.

Highwing blinked. *Indeed. And you—I must learn, now, what to make of you.*

You don't have to make anything of me. Just let me go.

The dragon cocked his head. *Oh? And if I did? Do you think you would leave this realm alive? You have already been noticed, you know, and not just by me. Did you not feel that shudder in the underrealm? You have placed yourself in great danger by coming here. Do you think they would let you leave? His eyes shifted to her left. You would not be the first outsider to die in their flame . . . if their boasts are to be believed.*

Jael followed the direction of his gaze. The other dragons were still wheeling in the night air against the moon. She had forgotten about them. She could see tiny billows of flame; the dragons were not too close now, yet close enough to attack, if they wished to. *Do you mean . . . that riggers are . . . always killed?* she asked, swallowing.

Highwing answered in a mutter. *Who knows, really? There is little enough that is certain, these days. He paused in thought. Though there is one, or I should say, rumor of one who . . . walks in the realm as a free demon. More than that, I don't know. But—*

He was interrupted by voices grumbling in the distance: *Highwing . . . Highwing . . . why do you wait?*

Highwing's voice rumbled to full power. *THIS ONE IS MINE!* he thundered, blasting the air with fire. *YOU MAY LEAVE US ALONE!*

He was answered by distant, haughty laughter. But the other dragons seemed to move farther off. Jael watched them uneasily. She turned to Highwing. *I am yours? Is that what you think?*

Steam curled into the air from the dragon's great nostrils. *Let us say that I fear that you are mine,* the dragon said with evident reluctance. *Something is greatly amiss here, one known as Jael. You have come innocently, it would seem. As the words say.*

The words?

The Words. The speaking. The prophecy. As the iffling has reminded me. If you are the one . . . He sighed again, then raised his head, as though cutting off his train of thought. *I have already done the unthinkable, in sparing you. And yet, it seems I must. To refuse would be to concede to those . . . to allow those who do evil to the realm . . . to prevail.* Jael tried to interrupt; but he continued speaking, as though following disconnected thoughts, his voice growing deeper. *Ahhh, and yet even so, I feel . . . I sense . . . still another force, another evil at work. Something that has nothing to do with me, or this realm. Something within . . . you! How strange!* His eyelids closed and opened again. He seemed surprised. *Perhaps several somethings. I cannot say precisely.* He drew a long, rumbling breath and seemed to debate something in his thoughts. *I almost fear to ask this, but . . . do you wish to tell me of it?*

Jael felt a growing sense of unreality. The dragon was making no sense to her. *Tell you—?*

What is troubling you.

I have nothing to tell you, she said, a little dizzily, *except to mind your own affairs.* His insistence was wearing at her. And every time he looked at her she felt naked, as though he were looking right through her, finding every one of her faults.

I have received your name, and given you mine, the dragon said in an injured tone, as if that explained everything. *You proposed the bonding, and I accepted, in honor. I trust you will not abuse the privilege. You may trust me, as well.*

After you lied and tried to kill me?

*That was when we were dueling. And before I knew that you were—or might be—*He paused, then grumbled something under his breath which she didn't catch. *Well, in any case, it was expected.*

Not by me, it wasn't.

The dragon stared at her without answering. In the silence, she knew that she should be on her way. But something in her did not quite want to go, something apart from her fear of the other dragons. Something in her wanted to learn more from this Highwing. He spoke of things she did not understand. But he almost sounded as if he had . . . expected her, somehow. The

dragon cleared his throat steamily. Some of the clouds broke and stars appeared over the mountains, Jael stared at them longingly, thinking of her dream: flying among the stars. That was what she was doing now. Wasn't she?

A voice broke the silence, neither hers nor Highwing's. *What's going on?*

The dragon peered around in confusion, but Jael recognized the voice with a shiver. *I'm flying, Mogurn*, she answered, her voice tightening.

Jael, come out of the net at once, ordered Mogurn's bodiless, furious voice.

I can't, she said, with a glance at Highwing. *There are dragons close by. Very close.* Please don't argue with me, she thought fervently. Our lives could depend on it.

Mogurn's answer was harsh, but tinged with fear. *Can you get us out of it? Out of trouble? I'm trying. If you let me.*

Do so. When we're out of trouble, you come and see me, Jael. I'm very disappointed in you. Mogurn broke the connection abruptly.

Jael shuddered and gazed off into the night, not meeting the dragon's eyes. Still, she was aware of his eyes glowing at her, through the thin curls of smoke that rose from his snout. *I think I begin to perceive*, Highwing murmured. *You must answer to someone . . . in your realm. Your spaceship. And that disturbs you. Am I right?*

Jael didn't answer, but something made her turn her head and look into those enormous eyes. The intensity of his gaze caused her to shiver. He seemed to be thinking deeply about something. *Without friend, will come one*, he murmured to himself. *Giving her name, will come one. Ah, Skytouch!* He shook his great head in dismay. *Jael*, he said finally, and his voice became so soft that it was almost inaudible. *You present me with a dilemma. What I am about to suggest is . . . not done . . . in this realm. And yet, it seems required by honor, by my obligation not to abuse what you have given me—in your name, and your . . . garkkondoh . . . real self.*

She squinted in puzzlement. *What do you mean?*

The dragon cleared his throat, noisily and at length. *Perhaps it would be better if you came with me for a little while. It might be that I can help you.* Almost wistfully, he continued, *A dragon helping a rigger. Imagine! Let us hope that I am right.*

She shook her head. *I don't understand you.*

The dragon's eyes glinted. Then she thought she heard something like a rumble of laughter, or perhaps a darker kind of sound, very soft, very deep in the earth. As the sound died away, Highwing said, *It appears that I am your servant and friend now, Jael—and you mine, if you will. It has been made our duty to help each other if we can. So the Words would seem to say. And so, you really should—must!—come with me.*

But I don't see why, she persisted. *How can you ask me to trust you?*

The dragon answered softly. *Because you have come to me. And because I seem to be all you have at the moment.*

Jael stared at him, wide-eyed with amazement. But for no reason she could understand, she felt her suspicions fading. A host of fears streamed through her mind: about Mogurn, and the pallisp, and the safety of her ship. And then they seemed to drain away. For some reason, a part of her wanted to go with this dragon—where, she didn't know. Never mind that he had tried to kill her. She squinted at his huge steady eyes, set within that great knobbed and finely scaled head. Strange as it seemed, she felt no threat. Certainly the dragon had nothing to fear from her, and if he meant to harm her, there was no need for him to resort to trickery. *I suppose*, she said, *you're going to promise not to hurt me. And you'll expect me to believe that.*

The dragon looked at her thoughtfully. *No one can promise not to hurt another—can one, Jael?*

Jael half closed her eyes, feeling a pain well up inside her. She tried to shut it away, but couldn't.

A moment later Highwing added softly, as though to himself, *There may be great hurt,*

before it is all over. But perhaps that need not concern us now.

She scarcely heard him, thinking suddenly of her ship and her flight. Never in her rigging experience had she heard of anything like this. But what were her choices, really? She was in a dragon place now, and subject to attack on sight. It seemed better to be with a dragon who, perhaps, intended no harm to her. *What exactly*, she said finally, *did you have in mind?*

The dragon blinked, dimming his eyes momentarily, like a ship's signal lights at sea. *Climb onto my back.* He turned around carefully on the crag and crouched low.

After a long hesitation, Jael climbed up and perched astride the base of his neck, just in front of his wing joints. She took a deep breath and clutched his neck.

Hold tight, he said, and sprang into the night air.

End of Book 1 excerpt

DRAGON RIGGER

(excerpt)

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Jeffrey A. Carver

**PART ONE:
THE DRAGONS**

Prologue

"Now you all know—" the lanky ex-rigger paused to gulp from his ale—*ahhhh!*—"—just how dangerous star travel can be." He peered out across the spaceport bar, studying the faces looking back at him—mostly young star-riggers who *thought* they knew a lot more than they did. "You all know that much, right?" he asked rhetorically. "Well, I'm *tellin'* you, it's a lot more dangerous than you ever imagined. Swear t'God!"

He burped and made a sweeping gesture with his mug. He reeled a little from the movement. His unkempt hair fell across his eyes, and he swept it back in annoyance. He had a story to tell, and the audience was volatile. Mustn't keep them waiting. "Y'see—"

"Just tell us the frickin' story, will you?" a fat man complained, from across the room.

"I *am* tellin' ya, dammit!" he said with a glare. He ticked off on his fingers the events that had occurred seven years ago this month. "*One!* We flew into the mountain region, cocky as all hell, thinking—there ain't nothing that can hurt *us*. We're two topflight, cream-of-the-crop, stay-out-of-our-way, kick-ass riggers! Right? Besides, everyone knows there are no dragons really *there*." He snorted at his own words. He glanced up, and twitched as a rigger in the back of the bar, not a human but some kind of horse-headed Swert, inhaled something from a chrome cylinder and blew an enormous, billowing neon bubble into the air above the barroom patrons.

He continued quickly, before anyone could get distracted. "*Two!* It wasn't more'n ten minutes before a whole flight of dragons appeared—and I don't mean some kinda cute lizards. I mean *dragons*. Huge things! We tried to make contact with them. *Friendly* contact." He barked out a bitter laugh, which seemed to have an odd effect on his audience. Some looked cynical, others looked puzzled. At least he was getting through to somebody.

A sword-wielding knight sprang up from the top of someone's head about three tables back and stabbed a few times with its blade, before winking out. The ex-rigger glared at the kid with the holo, a scrawny-looking, red-haired misfit who didn't even look old enough to be at a bar. The kid snickered nervously.

"*Three!*" the rigger roared, trying to overcome the interruption. "The bastards set on us like a pack of Alsepien blood wolves!"

"A real dogfight, eh?" someone called helpfully.

"It *was* a dogfight!" the rigger snapped. "Just like in prespace times. Except there was just the two of us in our ship, and at least four of them, flyin' around like crazy, blowing fire and smoke and tryin' to knock us out of the sky! You wouldn't've known we were in space, it looked so much like real mountains and sky. Never *seen* anything so real in the Flux. We couldn't do a thing to change the image, except turn our ship into a fighter-flyer and pray for the best." He shook his head, lost in his own story. "But our best wasn't much. There we were, twistin' and turnin' in the air, tryin' to scoot away from 'em. But—" and his voice caught as the fear rolled back up his spine, as though it had happened yesterday.

"They beat you, is that what you're trying to say?" snickered the red-haired kid.

The rigger leveled a drunken gaze at his taunter, so cocky and naive. Another holo erupted from the kid's head—a cartoonish figure of a man reeling and spinning before falling over with a sword hilt sticking out of his stomach. That evoked a few sardonic titters, which was clearly the reaction the kid wanted. The older rigger shook his head. He hated whiny, false bravado.

"Yeah, they beat us, you little punk. Four dragons, each one the size of this room, beat us in combat. Can you imagine that? We musta been weaklings."

He was answered with a restless stirring, and he continued at once. "They didn't kill us right off, though. They boxed us in and forced us down on a plateau. *Full-stop landing*." He paused for emphasis. The Flux never stopped moving in its endless course among the stars; everyone knew that. Only this time it had.

"They started lookin' us over," he said more softly. "Four fire-breathin' dragons, about to flame us to cinders right there in the net—and two scared-as-piss riggers, I don't mind admittin' it." He paused and gulped his ale. "I didn't think I'd ever see home again. And I wouldn't've, either, if it hadn't been for the iffitt, I mean if'ing . . ." He struggled with the memory, teetering, even with one elbow propped on the wooden bartop to support himself. "If that thing hadn't've showed up and told the dragons—" A belch erupted without warning from his throat, interrupting him.

"Let me guess! A prophecy?" someone shouted.

He stared in the general direction of the shout. He had at least some of them listening, even if they didn't want to admit it. "Well, you're getting a little ahead of the story, but yes, it told them the proph—*buurp!*—ecy." He put his fist over his mouth in embarrassment.

"Which of course *you're* going to tell *us!*" called a whip-bodied humanoid, who maybe didn't know human rules of etiquette, or maybe couldn't help speaking in such a sneering tone of voice.

"Unless you don't remember it!" called a shrill-voiced woman. Derisive laughter echoed after her.

"I remember it!" he said hotly. "Better than you remember your own name! Just give me a second to collect myself." He was trying not to become angry.

"Canteen, we've given you too much time already!" yelled a man just down the stand-up bar from him. "Tell us another one, will you? Of course—" and the drinker guffawed "—we won't believe that one, either. We don't even believe you when you're sober!"

"Oh, no?" The rigger drew himself up in an effort to maintain some dignity. "Well, this partic'lar story happens to be true, you half-witted imbecile. And my name is *Kan-Kon*, if you don't mind." He ignored the answering cackles and continued, heedless of the momentum that was clearly building against him. "So you don't think I'm tellin' the truth? Let me tell you something—I was out there flyin' the stars before most of *you* was in *potty* training, much less rigger training! I'm telling you the dragons are out there, and they killed my shipmate and they damn near killed me! You're all so smug here, you don't—"

"The prophecy, Canton!"

"Tell us and be done with it!"

Kan-Kon took another gulp, slopping ale on his sleeve. His fingers brushed uselessly at the spill. "Gah! Don't you know that stories—*true stories*—have to be savored like—"

"Kan-coon," shouted one of the veteran riggers, "either tell the damn story or shut up about it! We can't even have a conversation over here, with everyone laughing at you!"

"All right, Whitie," Kan-Kon said good-naturedly. "You've paid your dues. You've earned the right to nudge me a little, mebbe. As for the rest of you—*ahhhhh*." He snorted and upended his mug, draining the last of the ale. Gasping, he cried, "All right, then! Here's what they told me—*after* they killed my partner, and before they threw me and my spaceship back into civilized space." He slammed the mug onto the bar with a crash that brought near silence to the barroom. "*Listen to the words!*"

The only sound now was the whirl of the drinks dispensers. He gazed over the crowd and cleared his throat. "*From beyond life will come one! From beyond . . . ahh, hope . . . will come one . . .*" He hesitated. "Let's see, now—"

Someone slid a fresh mug of ale in front of him.

He nodded, frowning, then raised his voice again. "*Without friend will come one. And the realm . . . and the realm . . .*" And suddenly the words would not come. The words that were practically branded on his heart.

"Come on, you can do it! '*And the realm*'—?"

Kan-Kon sweated, trying to dispel the fog that was clouding his brain. "*And the realm shall tremble!*" he shouted.

The murmur from the crowd was not entirely sympathetic.

"Great! Is that it?" his encourager asked.

"No, there's more. I have it right on the tip o' my tongue. *Speaking her name will come one—hey!*" Someone was jostling his arm.

"Hey, Rangoon!"

He turned.

"Come on, Can-can!"

Someone or something tripped him, and his legs went out from under him like rubber. He crashed to the floor in a gush of ale. The other riggers shouted and jumped out of the way. "Jeez, I hope his *dragons* hold their ale better than he does!" one of them cried. "Hey, Ashcan," complained the whiny red-haired kid. "I think one of your dragons just *peed* on me! Can't you keep 'em on a leash?" Brightly colored holos danced in the air as someone helped Kan-Kon to his feet.

"Sorry, there. Just lost my—lost my—ah hell!" Kan-Kon moaned, peering with chagrin into his now-empty mug.

"I think you've had a little too much to drink, old man," said the one who was supporting him. "You tell enough of those stories, and sooner or later you're going to start believing them."

Kan-Kon grunted, wounded. "Yeah, I guess so. Hey, wait a minute! *Hey, what do you think you're doin'?*"

The hand supporting him wasn't just holding him up; it was propelling him toward the exit. A rising tide of hoots seemed to add impetus to the movement, and before he could fight back, he felt more hands pushing him toward the back door.

"Hey! Listen, you miserable—" he squawked, struggling to dig in his heels. But there was no stopping the movement now. The crowd surged and flowed like the currents of the Flux, making room for his passage.

"Good night, Tin Can!" someone yelled as the door opened before him. He felt a final shove at his back, and he stumbled out the door and fell to his hands and knees in the alleyway.

He raised his head and looked back indignantly. The door slammed shut, muffling the sounds of laughter. He hadn't exactly played the crowd tonight, had he? The stupid drunken sots. Didn't they know he was telling them the truth, and it was important? Were they too blind to see?

He sighed and lowered his head again, praying that the spinning would stop. Maybe he'd had a little too much to drink. But so what? He felt tears begin to well in his eyes, and the rest of the words rose suddenly, unbidden, in his throat, and he croaked them into the empty alleyway:

*"From that one
comes a beginning!"*

*From that one
comes an ending!"*

He raised his voice to a shout.

"And you can bet your ass the realm will tremble!"

Sighing in bitter triumph, he pushed himself back onto his feet and staggered away into the night.

Chapter 1

Dragons in the Realm

Lightning flashed in the sky like a demon's breath, splitting the night air with great jagged thrusts, hammering the vale with thunder. It was unnatural, WingTouch thought—that lightning, driven by a power no dragon could comprehend. All the dragons had felt its sting. Those who confronted it directly were burned from the sky. Those who lacked the courage, or perhaps the foolhardiness to stay in the battle, had already fled.

WingTouch fought to remain airborne in the tossing winds. Even here at the edge of the skirmish, the very air had become an adversary, turned against them by the devilish power of the Enemy. How could he fight a storm like this? All he could do was tumble through the maelstrom of wind, ignoring all else but the need to destroy the creatures who were attacking the valley.

Something blacker than the night passed before him, and he instinctively flexed his wings in pursuit. Gaining on the shadowy thing, he exhaled a lance of flame. His aim was perfect. The fire struck the fleeing creature, and he heard its wail of pain. WingTouch roared in triumph, but his victory was fleeting. The blackness rippled and veered and fled into the night. He had hurt it, but it was still alive and now he had lost it.

So it had gone for half the night, since WingTouch's patrol had responded to a cry for help from the guardians of this grove. WingTouch had watched strong and faithful dragons being driven back from the flashing storm clouds, back from these *undragon drahls* of the Enemy that filled the sky with their trills of laughter. Dragon in shape, but not in substance, the drahls were the Enemy's most hated warriors, the leaders of his army of destruction, delusion, and fear.

But the drahls were not the only sorcery in the skies tonight. The Enemy had turned the very elements of nature against them. Amidst the lightning, it was hard even to see his fellow dragons. There were many in the sky, but fewer than at the start of battle. How many had died? How many had fled? WingTouch had felt death all around him, and dragons passing to the Final Dream Mountain, but mostly he had felt terror reigning in the sky. The valley below, with its precious *lumenis* groves, was being pummeled by lightning; and the dragons themselves by withering attacks of freezing fire from the drahls. So far, the dragons had held the defense in the air, and the guardian spells had held below. But for how much longer?

As if in answer to his thought, an explosion of lightning and thunder rocked the air. WingTouch shuddered, and felt something change in the air below. He glimpsed a pair of drahls flickering like shadows low across the basin. How had they gotten so low? Had the guardian spells failed? He thought he heard a roar of anger from the spell-wielding dragons on the ground.

Bucking the winds, Windrush dove to give chase. He passed harmlessly through the layer where he should have encountered a challenging spell-barrier. He felt nothing; the spells of protection *had* failed. He bellowed his rage; he gathered fire in his throat. But before he could catch the drahls he saw cold flames ripple across the ground ahead of him, pouring from the speeding creatures. His heart cried out—and *he* cried out to his fellow dragons for help, but his cry was lost on the wind. The others were occupied in battle high overhead. From the ground, he heard the wail of dying guardian dragons.

Speeding low over the valley, too far behind the drahls to stop them, WingTouch saw their freezing bursts of fire exploding in a long line, where the *lumenis* and the garden of power were being blasted into ruin. Within moments, one more living garden was gone, one more source of strength against the darkness. WingTouch beat his wings with impotent fury as he climbed back toward the others. There was nothing left to fight for here.

"DRAGONS, GATHER!" he thundered. His voice was nearly lost in the crashing of the storm. But some of the dragons heard, and they repeated his words in trumpeting cries. Three dragons fell in beside him. The rest gathered slowly, giving up the battle. When he was satisfied

that all who still lived had joined him, WingTouch bellowed, "DRAGONS, AWAY!" and they banked away from the wind and fled eastward into the night.

As they crossed the Scarred Mount Ridge, WingTouch wondered what he could say to Windrush and to the others back at the camp. With another lumenis grove lost to the Enemy, the outlook for the realm was bleaker than ever.

No, it would not make for a joyful report to his brother, the leader of the dragons. He could only hope that Windrush had fared better tonight than had his own patrol.

Chapter 2

Windrush

The wind sighed through the mountain pass like a restless spirit. The tall, silver dragon Windrush felt like such a spirit himself, just now. He smelled the wind and squinted into the fading sun. It was cold on the outcropping where he was perched, but it wasn't the cold that troubled the dragon. It was what he smelled, and didn't smell.

Windrush was probing not just the outer air, but also the air of the underrealm—the insubstantial world that lay beneath the one that his eyes beheld. He was searching for clues to an invisible path, a path lost now for many seasons. He was searching for the Dream Mountain, where the female dragons lived. He grunted throatily to himself. There was no sign, no hint at all. The Dream Mountain, once a day's flight away, was now simply gone as though it had never existed. The air blew cold and empty in his nostrils, except for the faint but ubiquitous smell of the Enemy, Tar-skel. It was the same all through the realm—here in the south borderlands, as well as in the north where the male dragons lived.

Windrush would not admit discouragement. He could not explain *how* the Dream Mountain could have vanished, or where it might have gone. It all seemed so impossible. But he had already flown far in search of it, and he would fly as far as he had to, to find the place where the draconae lived. *The draconae*. How he wished he had valued them properly when they'd still graced the realm with their singing and teaching! But who could have guessed that they would vanish without a trace?

The sparks from Windrush's breath glowed briefly in the air. Gazing out over the tumbled landscape, he felt a deep sorrow. This was a changed place, even from a season ago. The land here was called the Forest Mountains; but the forests, once green and dark and vibrant, were now brittle and lifeless. The trees were stunted, the wild lumenis virtually nonexistent. He sensed no small animals. It was a part of the desolation that afflicted the whole realm. Even near the dragon strongholds, the long-woven spells of protection were weakening, as if the land itself were being bled of life. Bled by the sorcery of Tar-skel.

It had not always been so. While Tar-skel's influence had been growing in the realm far longer than any of them liked to believe, Windrush remembered well the victory of just a few seasons ago, when the Enemy had been dealt the most serious defeat in the history of this generation of dragons. It had been a magical moment: Jael, the outsider from another world, with her friends, riding on Windrush's back to the aid of his father Highwing. Sentenced to death in the Black Peak, Highwing had been the one dragon to actively resist the rising tide of evil in the land. The one dragon with courage, the one dragon to keep faith with the Words of Prophecy by befriending an outsider. The one dragon . . . until, at Jael's urging, Windrush himself had flown against all hope to challenge the darkness, to free his father.

They had saved Highwing—Jael had, really—in an astonishing rescue, bringing him back from the brink of a fiery death in an alien realm. They had not been able to save him from death itself, but they had allowed him to die with a dragon's honor and peace. And with that act, they had broken the power of the Black Peak and freed many of their fellow dragons from the enslavement of the Enemy. For a time afterward, the realm had enjoyed a renewal of life, a renewal of hope.

But it had not brought back the Dream Mountain. And now, in the face of new losses, that victory seemed long removed.

Windrush blinked, bringing his thoughts back to the present. Southward, toward the Sawtoothed Ridge, which ran east and west dividing the Forest Mountains from the harsher Stone Peaks of the far south, he caught sight of an odd-looking, puckered cloud formation that was moving in a peculiar corkscrew fashion. It was probably nothing; but still . . . if Enemy

sorceries were at work there, he probably ought to investigate. He hesitated, because there were many old places of magic in the far south, and he had little knowledge of what he might find. It would be wiser to travel in company. But the nearest companions were far to the north.

Finally he launched himself into the south wind, wondering at his own decision. It had been almost as if he had heard a voice whispering in the back of his mind, urging him on. But if so, whose voice? The spirit of Highwing, whose leadership he had assumed? He didn't think so. Perhaps it was one of those enigmatic ifflings who appeared at the oddest times, bearing news or counsel. He shook his head, scanning the land below.

Windrush?

Startled, he glanced to his left and glimpsed a shimmer of light in the air. A reflection off a distant peak, a trick of sunlight? Now it was gone. But he *had* heard a voice. A moment later he caught another sparkle of light in the corner of his eye, and he looked again.

Flying alongside him was an airy being of light. It seemed to have no substance; it expanded and contracted as it flew, like a slow-moving flame. "Iffling!" Windrush murmured.

The iffling made no response. Windrush was accustomed to this behavior from ifflings, though he sometimes found it irritating. He flew on, letting the iffling follow in formation.

When it finally spoke, he almost missed its whisper. *Where you are bound, dragon, you might well find one who can help.*

Windrush rolled slightly toward the iffling, peering at its intangible form. "Did you speak?" he rumbled.

With a chime of laughter, the iffling transformed itself into a dragon-shaped flame. *Am I so difficult to hear? You must listen to me, dragon-leader!*

Windrush flicked his gaze ahead to his course. "I am listening."

Very well. Do you fly in search of the Dream Mountain?

"Of course! What do you imagine?"

Then perhaps I can help.

"Indeed!" Windrush whispered, with more frustration than relief. "How often have I called out to you, asking the way? But your kind would not come to tell me."

The iffling flickered as it glided alongside him. It answered, sadly it seemed, *It is not that we would not, dragon, but that we could not. Do we know the way? Not any way that we could tell you.*

Windrush let his anger erupt in spite of himself. "You always *act* as if you know such things!"

Dragon! Do we travel on the winds? Do you travel as the ifflings do? What good to spin images of airs and currents that you could never know—that we cannot even travel ourselves?

Windrush flew in silence, absorbing the iffling's words. "Perhaps," he muttered. "But couldn't you have just said so? Why must you always speak in riddles?" He already regretted his outburst. He had no quarrel with the iffling. "Still," he sighed, beating his wings, "I suppose I would rather hear your riddles than nothing at all."

If the iffling had taken offense, it gave no sign. *You must search for a cavern,* it murmured.

"A cavern?"

In the ridge ahead, in a place of forgotten magic.

Windrush cleared his great throat.

There you may find one like a demon, a changeling spirit.

The dragon coughed a small flame into the wind. A demon? A changeling spirit? That sounded more like a drahl than a friend. Still, his friend Jael had once been likened to a demon, and he would have given almost anything to see her again. But his friend Jael was a human.

The iffling seemed to recognize his thought. *I doubt that it is anyone you know—or who will welcome you. Nevertheless, if you speak to it with care, you may gain useful knowledge.*

"Knowledge?" Windrush asked. "What sort of knowledge?"

The iffling did not answer. Windrush beat his wings, scanning the peaks ahead. That odd storm cloud had risen and dissipated. Perhaps, he thought, it had merely been a coincidence of nature; or perhaps a perfectly ordinary cloud had passed close to a place of power. When he glanced sideways again, his companion seemed to have disappeared. "Iffling?"

Then he saw its twinkle in the air, a little behind him. It was dropping away, and its words sounded tired, as though it were having trouble maintaining its presence here. *You must pass into the range. Look for a cavern within. Use all your senses to locate the entrance. But beware of treachery!* And with that, the iffling vanished.

Windrush clenched and unclenched his talons, exhaling slowly as he soared onward. Beware of treachery? It seemed to him that advice from an iffling always carried some warning of danger. But their advice also generally turned out to be perceptive and true, and he had never regretted following it. And given his present need, what choice did he have?

* * *

He flew high over the range. The sharp summits of the mountains passed beneath him, icy grey claws reaching toward the sky. The wind currents felt hostile and unpredictable, lifting and buffeting him. He felt a brooding presence in the air. Beneath him were rock formations cracked and broken from some age-old convulsion of the land. He searched, riding the treacherous air currents, feeling the fires of impatience in the back of his throat. What had the iffling said? *You must pass into the range.* "Into," not "over." Was there some passage hidden in the spine of the mountains?

He banked back toward the north side of the ridge and skimmed low over the slopes. Soon he felt a faint tingle in his undersense. Dropping close to the withered scrub, he spotted a thin line of shadow, a vertical crevice in the face of the slope. He flared to a landing and peered into the opening. It was too small for him to enter; but his undersense continued to tingle, and he thought he sensed a magic woven into the stone. Possibly the crevice was open to anyone, of any size, who wished to enter. Possibly it was also a trap.

Sniffing, he looked around. The wind sighed, filling his nostrils with a tang of dust and barren stone. Nothing else moved. Muttering to himself, Windrush drew back and breathed a short tongue of flame along one side of the crevice. The flame didn't touch the stone, but passed straight into it, undeflected. With a rumble of satisfaction, he thrust his head in and stepped through the stone wall.

Blinking his eyes as the entry spell quivered over him, he half expected to find himself standing in a cavern. Instead he stood in a long passageway that looked exactly like the same crevice, but vastly enlarged. It looked deep, but wide and high enough for him to fly in.

Spreading his wings, he glided cautiously down the passageway, slow-flying between its twisting walls. There was a certain comfort in being surrounded by stone, even unfamiliar stone. As deeply as he loved the wind and sky, he also loved the feeling of solid mountain around him. It reminded him of his own cavern, with its weavings of protection. But here, he knew, he must keep his senses sharp for danger.

The walls gradually closed inward and at last forced him to land. Ahead, the dark passage constricted sharply and crooked to the left. Windrush drew a slow breath, smelling for treachery. There was a dank mustiness here, and a cobwebbing of old magic, but nothing he could identify as a danger. The thought of squeezing through a tight passage did not much appeal to him, but if this was the passage the iffling had referred to, he saw little choice.

Still, he was vulnerable here; he could no longer fly away. He sank his thoughts into the underweb of the world, probing to see if he could craft an escape spell if he had to. What he found was an astonishing murkiness in the underrealm; he could not probe far at all. But he felt a distinct tingle; he was approaching a change in the passage spell. It felt like an old-magic spell,

not specifically familiar to him. But he suspected that it might lead him, through a twist of the underrealm, into a cavern deep within the mountain—and thus, perhaps, to the one he was looking for, a demon who possessed knowledge of the Dream Mountain.

He crept forward into the constriction, his nails rasping on the stone. As he craned his neck around the bend, he felt the new spell wrinkling open. "Someone inviting me in?" he rumbled aloud. There was no answer.

He squeezed past the bend, and felt a shiver from head to tail as he pulled his massive body out of the constriction. He blinked in confusion, gazing suddenly into a dazzling, unnatural-seeming yellow light. With a hiss, he stepped forward.

"WELL, DRAGON," boomed a voice that seemed to reverberate from an enormous space. "HAVE YOU COME BACK TO CHALLENGE AGAIN THE ONE YOU ABANDONED?"

Chapter 3

Demon in a Cave

Blinking slowly, Windrush tried to focus through the hazy glow. Gradually he became able to discern the outlines of a large cavern. He still could not identify the source of the light, or of the voice. But the smell of magic was strong, ancient, and unmistakable. "To whom," he rumbled, "might I be speaking? Do I know you?" What had the voice meant by, ". . . *challenge the one you abandoned*"?

He was answered by harsh, reverberating laughter, then a sound like a claw being drawn across stone. Windrush squinted and saw movement. Something was dancing, just out of focus. Something enormous. Some great enemy warrior? Or perhaps merely a shadow.

He shrugged. He had not come here to be intimidated, and he didn't care if the thing outsized him. He probed again in the underrealm and, to his surprise, found a recognizable tangle of a simple spell of obscurity. He tugged the threads apart with his thoughts.

The haze of light abruptly shrank; and a small, glowing, crystal-faceted thing became visible, floating in the air directly in front of him. It looked alive; it pulsed and changed shape with a fluid movement, growing tall and slender with only a few glowing facets, then collapsing and billowing out to the sides with a great many facets. Inside it, a much smaller thing moved—a thing of dark, dancing fire. Windrush thought he recognized that shadow-fire. It looked exactly like the moving shape that, just moments ago, had appeared so huge and menacing.

"So. You are not without powers." The dark fire spoke in a smaller, but not friendlier, voice. "To answer your question—*you* I might not know, but I know your *kind* well enough."

"I see," the dragon murmured. He knew now what he was facing. It was a spirit jar. It was a cell containing a consciousness that had been stripped from its original body. Dragons in past times had used them for the capture of demons, or those believed to be demons. Though Windrush had never actually seen a spirit jar before, he recognized its appearance from tales told over the years. It was not a physical vessel of any sort, but rather a powerful confinement spell. He probed briefly, but could not make out the precise weaving in the underrealm; it was a highly complex crafting, far beyond his skills. Probably it was beyond the skills of anyone left in the realm—anyone on the side of the true dragons, anyway.

How did one deal with a spirit in a jar? He had no idea—nor did he know how dangerous it might be. He didn't think he could free it by accident, but then again he wasn't sure. He assumed there was a good reason for its imprisonment.

"Have you come to release me?" the thing asked curtly, as though reading his thoughts.

"I hardly think so," Windrush answered. "I don't know who you are, or why you are here. Perhaps you would like to tell me."

The being hissed and danced violently in its squirming prison. "Why should I tell you, dragon?"

Windrush cocked his head, blinking first one eye, then the other.

"You don't answer," the thing said.

"I won't answer," Windrush said, "until I have an answer to give." The dragon peered again around the enormous cavern, which was lit only dimly now by the glow of the spirit jar. It had the look of a dragon stronghold, but one musty and long abandoned. There were many forgotten holds scattered through the southern parts of the realm, but he had heard of none so large. Windrush felt dwarfed by it, and that made him uneasy.

With a rumble, he asked the spirit, "Have you done some wrong, that you are imprisoned—?"

"*I have done nothing wrong!*" the being cried, interrupting him. "It is *your* kind that holds me here! Imprisoning me and then abandoning me!"

Windrush deliberately opened one eye wider than the other. "You have done nothing wrong?"

You are an innocent captive?"

"That's what I just said! If you wish to challenge me, then first free me!"

The dragon drew a silent breath and studied the demon. "Allow me to pose a question. I have been told that there is a creature living here who is possessed of . . . certain knowledge and wisdom. I was wondering if you might *know* of this creature."

"Who told you that?"

"A being of my acquaintance. An iffling."

The spirit hissed. "Iffling! If that is supposed to be a recommendation, I hardly think—" It shuddered with rage, then suddenly calmed. "Still. A being of knowledge and wisdom? It may be that *I* . . . could be described as such a one as you mention. But you have not told me who *you* are."

"That is true," Windrush said. Nor did he have any intention of giving his name, at least not yet. Sharing one's name was a risky proposition. It *could* lead to a sharing of enormous trust, as he had learned once, when he'd shared his name with the human Jael. But he had no reason to trust this being. "It appears," Windrush noted, "that you have been alone here for some time. And that you do not often have the benefit of civilized company."

"I have all the company I need," the spirit retorted bitterly. "If your only purpose in coming here is to quote ifflings at me, then you can leave now, thank you very much."

Windrush wondered at the bitterness, and wondered if he didn't detect an air of false bravado in them. "I would guess," he hazarded, "that my departure would leave you quite alone."

The being shivered.

"And I would guess that I could learn what I wish to know in other ways."

"Oh? How is that?"

"By peering into the binding spell that holds you. I would guess that your secrets cannot withstand my gaze."

The being danced nervously in its prison of light.

Windrush stepped closer to the glowing jar. He cocked his head, searching for the best angle. Within the shifting facets of the jar, he thought he might find doorways into the being's mind. The jar's glow flickered as he narrowed his focus into one facet, exactly as if he were searching the gaze of another dragon. The demon hissed with alarm. Windrush searched the layers of the binding spell, and eased them apart just enough to touch the glinting threads of knowledge on the inside.

The demon reacted with blinding rage, *waves* of rage. Heedless, Windrush continued to probe, seeking the memories of the being. He soon realized that the rage was not a deliberate defense, but a rush of pent-up anger that had grown during long years of captivity in this cavern.

Windrush found himself moved almost to pity. But he reminded himself: Is it so terrible to keep a demon in isolation, where it can't work evil upon the realm?

Certainly not. *If* it is a demon of evil . . .

Doubt rose in his mind like groundwaters in a subterranean cavern. *If it is a demon* . . .

The spirit lashed futilely, trying to resist his probes.

Beyond the pain and rage, in the misty reaches of the spirit's mind, images began to form: memories of long years of lonely emptiness, of humiliation, of hatred toward all things dragon. Still they did not reveal who this being *was*. Windrush probed deeper, further back in time. The mists parted, and Windrush glimpsed movement, the quick movement of dragons in the air, the slower movement of something that glimmered silver and gold, large as a dragon, but undragonlike in form. He heard the sounds of a challenge and knew that he had found the memory of a duel.

He recalled the rush of another's memories, shared seasons ago. There was scant resemblance between his friend Jael and this wretched creature in the jar. And yet . . .

The outcome of the duel was clear. Windrush ignored it and peered deeper. It was difficult

not to recoil from the touch of the alien thought, the touch of hostility and anguish. But Windrush wanted to know the nature of this being. He glimpsed fluttering memories that preceded the duel: boredom and careless flight into danger. Threaded through these memories were others, dark and incomprehensible, which seemed to arise from hidden lusts and emotions. Probing deeper, the dragon found a group of clearly focused images.

He was so stunned he almost broke the link with the creature's mind.

He saw it in its physical form. He saw it in its own mind's eye, as it flew into the dragon realm. *The being was a rigger—a human!* The similarity of body shape was unmistakable, and so were the glimpses of the ship in which it flew. Glimpses were all Windrush had ever gotten of his friend Jael's ship, but it was impossible not to see that the gleaming surfaces, the silvery sheen of the ghostly shapes, the sparkle of that magical thing that Jael had called a *net*, were very much like what he saw now in this being's memory.

This thing before him was a *rigger*—or had been, until its duel with the dragons. Windrush tried to look again at the duel, to see what had happened, to see why the dragons had imprisoned the human's spirit; but those images had receded out of sight now. Had the dragons considered the rigger an invading demon? Many dragons would, but especially Tar-skel dragons. Windrush could not discern any hostile intent in this rigger's memory; neither could he tell whether the dragons who had captured him had been true dragons or Tar-skel dragons.

But he did glimpse one thing that he hoped might help him coax the being into talking. He caught, in a stray flash of memory, its name.

The spirit thrashed violently. *Get out!* it hissed. *You have no right!* It was trying frantically to close off its thought to him. Windrush shrugged inwardly; with a wordless mutter, he released the spirit from his gaze.

The figure sputtered with rage in its jar of light, mouthing incomprehensible words. Windrush regarded it silently. After a few moments he murmured, "I note your anger. But you would do well to control it, one named Hodakai."

The sounds of rage cut off, and the cavern was filled with silence. Then, softly: "So, you know my name. What good do you think it will do you? Your friends who imprisoned me knew my name, and I gave them nothing. I will give nothing to you, either." The voice was stiff with defiance.

"I know who you are," Windrush said. "And I know the realm from which you come. I know your people." That last statement was an exaggeration to be sure. He knew only three riggers, and only one of them human; but they were friends, and not just to him. The entire realm owed them a debt beyond measure. Without them and the breath of life and strength they had brought to this world, the realm would have fallen long ago.

Hodakai laughed flatly. "You know my people, do you? Do you think that they can't still come get me out? Perhaps it's what you *don't* know that should worry you. Do you think I did not see *your* thoughts, lizard?"

Windrush studied the shadow-in-light. Quite possibly Hodakai *had* learned something of Windrush's thoughts while they were joined. If the spirit knew enough to look, there was probably no avoiding it.

Hodakai chuckled. "I know what you're looking for."

"Oh? What do you think I am looking for?"

"Answers, answers . . ." the thing said in a crafty tone.

The dragon snorted.

"Keepers of the Words, and those who make the realm tremble," Hodakai said, dancing defiantly.

The dragon's blood chilled. *Keepers of the Words*. So Hodakai knew about the Dream Mountain. And the draconae. "Do not toy with me, one named Hodakai," he murmured softly.

The shadow capered in the light. "You know my name, you think you own me. But I am not

yours. I have not *given* you my name. You may command my life, but not my thoughts."

Windrush exhaled steam. Hodakai clearly understood much—and not just of spells. Did he know and understand the ancient prophecies? Windrush faced a delicate choice. Whatever risks he might be taking with Hodakai, it could well be worth it. But it was going to be difficult to gain the being's trust.

The spirit interrupted his thoughts. "Dragon, I tire of your presence. You are no longer welcome here." The shadow seemed to leer at him out of its jar. It made stabbing motions toward him.

Windrush exhaled smoke. "I have come intending no harm. But I might say that it would not hurt you to learn some respect, rigger-spirit. I am many times your size and power."

Laughter echoed in a ring around the cavern. "You might be many times my size on the outside—but in here, all sizes are made equal, dragon. Take a good look around."

Windrush glanced warily out of the corner of his eye. Sizes made equal? Certainly the cavern dwarfed both of them. Several boulders stood nearby, and he realized that there was something unusual about them. They were streaked with large veins of malinor crystal—stunningly large veins. Unless those rocks weren't really the boulders they seemed. Windrush touched them with his undersense and felt something odd.

"Note the lumenis branch to your right," Hodakai said.

The dragon shifted his gaze. A large branch from a dead lumenis plant lay on the stone. An enormous branch . . . unless it was actually a twig, as the size of the desiccated blossom-nub at its tip seemed to indicate. Windrush recalled the entry spells that had brought him into this place—the crack on the outside, and the way that the inner passage had seemed much larger, but otherwise identical.

Suppose the passageway had *not* been made larger. Suppose *he* had been made *smaller*.

The shadow-spirit crowed and made little cackling sounds, delighting in the dragon's discomfiture.

Windrush tugged with his undersense, hoping to unravel any remaining spells of illusion. Nothing changed that he could see: not his size, nor the size of the jar, nor the lumenis branch. How could this have happened, without his even noticing it? Had his wisdom fallen so far? The spell must have been left here by the departed guardians of this vault; and if so, its makers might return to discover whom they had ensnared. And if they were Tar-skel dragons, or drahls, or other beings sympathetic to the Enemy . . .

Windrush slowly scanned the area, trying not to betray his alarm. Was someone else watching him? The cavern walls were full of shadows, shifting in the light of the spirit jar. For an instant he thought he spied a moving gleam in a far corner, and he swung his head, flame hot in his throat. But he saw nothing.

"Feeling edgy, all of a sudden?" the spirit asked.

The dragon checked an urge to flame the jar. "Spirit-named-Hodakai, you play a dangerous game, toying with matters that you little understand."

"Oh. Tsk, tsk. Do you intend to stop me?"

"I have no need to stop you. But your life could perhaps be pleasanter if you chose your enemies more wisely—and your friends."

"Ah—you know so much of my life, then. Perhaps you would have me choose a *dragon* as a friend. You, perhaps?"

"I have no need of your friendship," Windrush answered coldly. "I merely remind you of the difference between choosing well and choosing poorly."

He shifted his gaze. There were clear signs of dragonwork here: faceted surfaces that spoke of artisan spells, and surfaces burnished by dragon fire or scarred by dragon claws. Everywhere was the rubble and dust of long neglect. Why had Hodakai's captors abandoned him here? Had they planned to return, and forgotten? Servants of the Enemy might well do such a thing.

"Perhaps indeed you were wronged," Windrush said offhandedly. "Tell me, what do you know of the Keepers of the Words? Were you imprisoned by their enemies?"

There was no answer.

The spirit's shadow was no longer visible in the jar. Windrush cocked his head, puzzled. It seemed unlikely that the spirit had escaped; more likely, it was busy sending a message out through the underrealm.

"Dragon!" he heard—a soft, whispery voice, not at all like Hodakai's. Where had that come from?

"Dragon!"

This time he glimpsed movement, in the gloom off to his left—just a shimmer in the air, like an iffling. But he did not feel any sense of the presence of an iffling. And yet *something* was nearby. Perhaps a simple cavern sprite.

"It is a stubborn one that you speak to, dragon," whispered a different voice. He glimpsed another shimmer. Yes—*sprites*, he thought. "There are others who seek to win him over, as well." There was high, tinkling laughter, then a third voice. "Of course, *they* won't give him what he wants, either."

Windrush asked softly: "Others?"

"Silence!" shouted Hodakai, his shadow-form reappearing in the spirit jar, expanding and contracting angrily. "You pests, you meddlers, you flies upon the earth!" He was answered by tiny peals of laughter, which made him angrier still.

Windrush blinked slowly. "So, Hodakai—what others do you speak to? Perhaps you are not so isolated here, after all! Is this some treachery of yours, to make me think otherwise?"

Hodakai hissed.

Windrush angled his head, searching for the sprites as he called out to them. "You say, creatures in the shadows, that there are others with whom I must contest?"

"Quiet! Silence!" shouted Hodakai, even more furiously than before.

Windrush heard more laughter, then silence. He glanced back at Hodakai. "Well now, it would seem that we both seek something. Are you so certain that you wish to oppose me? Would you not prefer civility between us?" He recalled that the last time he and a rigger had met, it had been the rigger who had proposed civility.

Hodakai didn't answer; but Windrush felt something shifting in the underrealm. He heard a rumbling sound and glimpsed flashes of light at the edges of his vision, just out of focus. Deep in the underweb, some tightly wound sorcery had just been released. Instinctively, he crouched in readiness; a shiver passed through his body.

Hodakai cackled.

Windrush spat fire at the demon, but his own hot breath washed back at him. The spirit jar was shrinking. He couldn't tell what was happening in the confused twistings of this new sorcery. But one thing was certain—another trap was springing. His muscles coiled for a leap.

He caught himself. The ceiling loomed low over his head, much lower than before. A leap would have sent him smashing into it.

Was the ceiling dropping? *No—he was growing!* He was about to be crushed against the rock. To his left, a visual distortion was unkinking, and he glimpsed a much larger space there. He lunged sideways, keeping his head low. His wing pinions scraped the ceiling, but then the floor dropped away and the ceiling vanished—and he leaped out into a vast open space. He landed with a roar and swung his head back and forth, shocked at the extent to which he had been deceived. Surely these spells were the work of the Enemy! He probed again at the underrealm, trying to shake free any further folds of illusion.

At the sound of laughter, he turned to face Hodakai.

The laughs came from a jar that was no larger than one of Windrush's foreclaws. It sat in a small alcove carved into the side of the cavern. It was in that space that the shrunken dragon had

been standing—and nearly crushed—when the spell had been released. Hodakai's laughs sounded thin and reedy now, as Windrush peered in at the jar. "So! Your true stature is shown!" he muttered, wishing he could be more triumphant. "I grant you your skill in the use of the spells, spirit—even if you stole them."

"Stole them?" Hodakai squawked.

"Come, these spells are hardly your working."

The spirit responded wordlessly and angrily. The dragon felt a sudden draft in the underrealm, as though another opening spell had been triggered deep in the mountain. Was some new power coming into the cavern?

He glimpsed a movement in the shadows to his left and jerked his head, catching the smell of drahls. Fool! he thought. He should not have remained here so long, in a place where he was disadvantaged in a fight. Now it was too late to slip away.

Three drahls abruptly appeared—dragonlike shadows, above and to either side of him. Hot fire rose in his throat. He raised his head and blew flame at the drahl overhead, then swung side to side, breathing fire at the other two. The flames crackled and lit the cavern. The drahls vanished in the fire, but reappeared a moment later, farther away. They hissed in unison: "*You are a trespasser here, and trespassers die!*"

Windrush breathed fire again. It passed through the drahls as they darted in and out of the shadows of the cavern. Smoke and dust billowed, clouding everything. The drahls were a deadly threat here, where he could not fly and fight properly.

The drahls flashed overhead, sputtering freezing fire. He snapped at them, but they were fast, and hard to follow. He felt a chill. Where were they now?

Craning his neck, he spotted them close to the ceiling, their cold fire flickering over the stone. That was puzzling; they seemed to have forgotten him. "Hodakai!" he hissed—but there was no answer from the spirit. Keeping a wary eye on the drahls, he extended half his awareness into the underrealm, trying urgently to understand the sorcery he was facing.

He heard a crack of splintering stone, and suddenly understood. A spell was unraveling: the spell that held the cavern intact! Could drahls have such power? He was in peril if they could destroy the cavern. It would be one thing if he knew the weaving that bound it together, to defend it. But he didn't, and there was no time now to explore it. The cracking sounds were growing louder.

He had to get out. He probed feverishly in the underweb, through the murk that the drahls had stirred up, searching out the entry and exit spells. The way he had come in was closed, but there had to be other ways out of this dragon stronghold!

Rocks were falling deafeningly around him; he tried to ignore them as he traced pathways through the fog of the underweb. He heard the drahls keening, preparing to attack, and he ignored even that. And then he found it: a fold in the underweb where an opening was concealed. It was all he needed. Finding the thread that would pull it open, he exclaimed, "*Gharkei!*"—and opened his eyes, spread his wings, and leaped toward the fracturing ceiling, past the startled drahls.

The way was clear. But even as he passed into the spell-opening, he glimpsed another spell collapsing—and the drahls flickering out of sight. He heard raucous laughter. His last glimpse behind was of a completely intact cavern, with no sign of drahls at all.

Before he could react, dizziness hit him, then a blast of cold. His wings bit into a freezing nighttime air, and before he could even focus his eyes, he knew that he was high above the mountains in the dead of night. And he knew, too, that something had just gone shockingly wrong. The drahls had been works of illusion, smells and all, and so was the falling ceiling! Only his own exit spell had collapsed the image.

He had been tricked by Hodakai—tricked into leaving. Whether it was ancient dragon magic or the Enemy's sorcery that the spirit had commanded, he had used it diabolically well.

Windrush banked and turned, fuming. An angry fire burned deep in his throat, and he vented it at the mountain he had just left. The peak was a jagged, sullen presence in the night, and his flame an impotent protest. He could probably force his way back in, but for what? To take revenge for the humiliation? No, the demon wielded surprising powers, and it would be pointless to engage in a contest with it now. When Windrush returned to speak with Hodakai, it would be on his own terms.

His pride stinging, he climbed higher in the night air to find his bearings for the long journey home.

Chapter 4

Rent

Hodakai laughed long and hard. He laughed until his laughter became hollow, his triumph cold and lifeless. He had humiliated the intruder with his trickery, but that dragon was the first real visitor he had had in a very long time. He hated dragons, to be sure. But that one seemed less arrogant than his captors, even if it had refused to free him. And now, it had fled to freedom while Hodakai remained trapped here in a demonic bath of light in the emptiness of the cavern. He knew perfectly well that the dragon had merely been caught off guard by a sophisticated illusion. If it returned bent on vengeance, there was little he could do to stop it.

Still, he knew something that the dragon wanted to know. He had glimpsed the need in its mind. *Dream Mountain*. Hodakai didn't actually know the way to the place; but he knew how, or at least by whom, the way had been hidden. And that knowledge was his only possible weapon against the despised race of creatures who had imprisoned him.

But the trouble with savoring any feeling of victory here was that the feeling never lasted. The passage of time in this spirit-prison was something beyond his comprehension. Moments of pleasure were like birds on wing, rare and fleeting; but the rest of his hours clung to him like a smoky pall, broken only by flights of fantasy, and memories of rigging. Never until his capture by the dragons had he believed in an eternal life, but he was living one now. He envied his shipmate, who had died in the duel with the dragons.

Still, he was not totally alone here. He had company in the sprites that lived in the cavern, emerging from time to time to dance about and tease him. He didn't really understand them, or their purpose in the scheme of this world. They spoke intelligibly, but in other ways seemed more like pigeons in the rafters than meaningful companions. They seemed to have no real understanding of him, or of his pain. What did they know of the realm of the Flux, or the universe of humanity?

Come to that, what did Hodakai know of humanity anymore? For all he knew, centuries had passed in his absence, sweeping away all that he had once been a part of. Not that it mattered; he could never return. He would forever regret his folly in venturing into the dragon realm in the first place, but regrets could not change what had happened.

He blinked, and for a moment slipped back into memory . . . felt the streams of the galactic Flux moving past his fingers like golden rays of light as he piloted his ship in wondrous freedom . . .

The image collapsed quickly. *Mustn't get lost in that now*, he muttered to himself. *Too much to think about. Can't keep this to myself.*

He did have one other place to turn for conversation, one other person to share his thoughts with. It wasn't someone he *trusted*, exactly, but it was someone who at least understood him—understood what it was like to be torn from his body and exiled from his own universe. This someone knew the experience—and furthermore, claimed to have a way out, a way to something better.

Hodakai wasn't so sure about that last part, but he did have a feeling that Rent might be interested in hearing of the dragon's visit. The trouble was that Rent was on the side of the drahls and the drahls' Master, and that made Hodakai most uneasy. He had no interest in becoming embroiled in this world's conflict. There were dragons on both sides, and things far worse than dragons, and Hodakai wanted no part of either side. But there was one certain enticement that Rent kept dangling before him . . .

Without actually being aware of making a decision, Hodakai murmured the words of the spell that Rent had left in place, that twisted space and opened the connection to Rent's hideaway. Hodakai had no idea where, in space, the other rigger-spirit was; but with this spell-

weaving, his thoughts passed easily through the vastness of the underrealm, tracing their way along the wispy strands that led to Rent's inner sanctum. Hodakai felt the guarding spells of the other's territory; he paused and gave a little hoot to let Rent know he was here.

The guarding spells shifted and opened. *Yes? Why, my dear friend Hodakai—is that your voice I hear? Let me look upon your face!* cried the faraway spirit.

Why not? Hodakai replied, with a flash of annoyance. If they were such good friends, why wouldn't Rent reveal his real and full name? Hodakai had revealed *his* name to Rent early on, and he'd wondered ever since whether in doing so he had given Rent some subtle and indefinable power over him.

The only "face" he had to show was his dancing-shadow self. Rent, on the other hand, appeared in full body, a human figure walking through the aura of light that was the underrealm connection between them. Rent was a tall and iron-featured man. His expression was flinty and arrogant; he walked with a casual bluster and wore a smile that, far from being disarming, made Hodakai tighten his guard.

It is always so good to see you, Hodakai! To what do I owe the rare privilege?

Hodakai hesitated. Now that he was here, he wasn't sure what he wanted to say. *I've been thinking*, he said finally.

Rent cocked his head. *Dangerous habit. Are you calling to ask my permission?*

Hodakai twitched with anger. All right, so it was Rent who had taught him all that he knew of underrealm magic—and for that matter, most of what he knew about the realm, period, from the fate of his shipmate to the concealment of the dragons' Dream Mountain. But Rent had also withheld much, and it was clear that he would continue to do so until Hodakai accepted servanthood to him, and to the one whom Rent served.

Hodakai decided to ignore Rent's jibe. *I've been thinking about those flying serpents you call friends*, he said finally.

Oh? And what have you been thinking about them? I presume it is true dragons you are speaking of, yes? There was a pinch in the center of Rent's forehead, and it deepened as he spoke.

Well . . . What Rent called "true" dragons were those loyal to Rent's Master—the one called Tar-skel, the "Nail of Strength." Hodakai, frankly, didn't know if there was much difference between the Tar-skel dragons and any others, except for their allegiance in the war. But he knew this: it had been Tar-skel dragons who had captured him.

Hodakai, Hodakai! Rent chided, apparently reading his mind. *Can you not be the master of your own outrage? How can you be counted in the coming victory if you cling to your petty grudges? Accept what has happened and move on!*

Hodakai didn't answer. This was Rent's way of asking what he never tired of asking, which was: when would Hodakai give up and declare his allegiance to Tar-skel, and of course, to Rent? Not that Tar-skel himself gave a flying finger at the moon, Hodakai was sure. Probably the Nail had never even heard of him.

But Hodakai's hatred of the Nail's dragons ran deep in his soul. He couldn't understand why Rent didn't hate them equally. Rent too was a rigger who had fallen prey to dragons in the Flux. But unlike Hodakai, Rent had parlayed his captivity into power and influence, into both servanthood and mastery. The trouble was, whether Hodakai liked him or not, Rent was the only human he was likely ever to see again in his life.

Are you planning to tell me what you've been thinking? Rent asked sharply. *Or did you call just to announce to me that you had been thinking? Some of us do that every day, you know.*

Hodakai seethed at the sarcasm, but tried not to show it. *I called, actually, to tell you of an interesting visitor I've just sent away.*

Rent's expression narrowed. *Visitor? Why didn't you tell me that in the first place?*

I was trying to. Anyway, it was a dragon.

One of your captors, coming to see if you had decided—

No—not one of those. One of the others. One not . . . aligned with you.

Rent's eyes shone with a fervor that made Hodakai nervous. *Do tell! And to what did you owe this visit from the enemy?*

How would I know? I'd never seen him or heard of him before. And I sent him packing, if that's what you're driving at.

I should hope so. But did you get any information out of him first? Every encounter with the enemy should be used to good purpose.

Your enemy, you mean—not mine. Or no more than any other dragon.

Hodakai, Hodakai—

And I wish you'd stop doing that.

Doing what?

I think you know. It was just one more way Rent had of pressuring him, by presuming that he and Hodakai had the same notion as to what constituted "the enemy." Hodakai wished now that he hadn't told Rent about the dragon.

No, Hodakai. What is it you want from me?

I want you to stop pushing me. I don't like it when you push me. I can make up my own mind.

Rent stared at him silently. His eyes shone with a power that seemed to penetrate every facet of Hodakai's being. *You're taking a very long time to decide where you stand, my friend.*

To that Hodakai had no answer, because it was true. When he replied, he chose his words carefully. *I sent him away, telling him nothing that would help him. But I suspect that he will be back. He seemed very interested in me. Seemed to want to offer some kind of . . . dragon friendship.* Hodakai stared at Rent, leaving his words hanging. It seemed just possible that, for the first time since he had become a captive in this land, he might actually have some bargaining power. Though he was hardly interested in any sort of friendship with the dragon, it might not hurt to have Rent believe that someone else was offering him enticements. And he had heard rumor of at least one other rigger who had formed such a friendship, so it was not a wholly empty threat.

It was impossible to judge the success of his tactic. Rent smiled inscrutably. *Tell me, Hodakai. Can this dragon, with its friendship, give you back your body? Can this dragon let you walk as a man?* Rent's underrealm figure executed a little tap dance for Hodakai, to emphasize the point.

Hodakai could not answer. In the end, it always came back to this. Rent, like Hodakai, had lost his physical body. But Rent, who not only served Tar-skel but also wielded his sorcery, now walked again as a man. Hodakai, Rent had promised, could do the same—if only he would swear allegiance to the Nail of Strength.

If only.

If only Tar-skel didn't give him such a bad case of . . . he didn't know what, exactly, but just the mention of the invisible sorcerer's name made Hodakai tremble. He couldn't say why. He just had a feeling that there was nothing good about this being, who was not a human or a dragon or anything else he had ever heard of.

Still, he couldn't say that to Rent. *I was only telling you what happened. I didn't say I was planning to throw in with the blasted dragon.*

But Rent persisted. He made a stabbing gesture with his finger. *Can the false dragons let you walk as a man, Hodakai? Can they?*

Hodakai shook his head; the gesture appeared as a slight tremor in his shadow. *No*, he whispered.

I can't hear you, Hodakai! Rent cupped a hand to his ear. *Can they?*

No, he repeated, a little louder.

No, Rent agreed. *They can't.*

And you of course can, Hodakai thought glumly. Or could, if you wanted to. But your price is high. I wish I could end this conversation.

The burden is light, Hodakai, and the pleasures are many. Think of that, before you do anything foolish.

I wasn't planning to do anything at all, Hodakai muttered.

I'm glad to hear that. I truly am. You will let me know if this dragon visits again?

Hodakai nodded reluctantly.

Splendid. Then I must be tending to other business. If there was nothing else—? Rent held his hands out in question.

Hodakai made a slight bowing movement, not quite in supplication but acknowledging the dismissal. He hated himself for doing it.

Then we shall speak later, Rent said and vanished, along with the window into his domain. Hodakai was left holding open the threads of a nonexistent connection in the underrealm.

Hodakai let the nimbus of his own world close back around him. He was trembling with anger and frustration. It seemed that every conversation with Rent ended this way. Around him he heard the chittering sounds of the sprites. He didn't have it in him to engage in their banter, or even to tell them to shut up. He couldn't keep his thoughts off Rent's offer; and he wept, as his world shimmered with the dark crimson heat of his trapped emotion.

Soon it was more than he could take. Thoughts of the Flux opened up before him and he drifted back into memories of Hodakai the rigger, fingers and hands stretching the net, crossing the gulfs between the stars, slipping the surly bonds of human space and time. . . .

But in time he found himself, to his own surprise, coming out of the memory and thinking again of the dragon that had come to see him.

Wishing that it would come again.

Wishing to hear the voice of the dragon.

Chapter 5

The Valley of Fallen Light

"Dream mountain! That is Windrush's obsession—not mine!" hissed the black dragon SearSky. His back was turned as Windrush landed in the main encampment. "We should be going after the Enemy to destroy him! Forget the underrealm! Forget the Mountain! Win back the lumenis, that's what I say!" The powerful dragon snorted fire.

At least a dozen pairs of glowing, faceted dragon eyes turned to follow Windrush as he strode to the center of the gathering, where the complaining dragon held forth. "SearSky! You wish to command us to victory—is that it?" Windrush asked. His mood was dark; he was still stinging from his encounter with the rigger-spirit.

SearSky turned, flared his nostrils, and fixed Windrush with a red-eyed stare. "At least I would command us into *battle*, Windrush—not into some endless search for something that is gone, probably forever! Why don't we take the fight where it belongs? To the Enemy!"

For a moment, Windrush said nothing, but he let the flame in the back of his throat produce a small flurry of sparks with each outgoing breath. "That is your wisdom, then?" he said at last.

He was answered, not by SearSky, but by mutters from many of the others gathered around. There was a good deal of sympathy for SearSky's opinion here. And these were many of Windrush's best leaders.

"I expect you heard about the defeat in the Valley Between last night?" SearSky said acidly.

Windrush swung his head in alarm, looking for his younger brother, WingTouch. WingTouch had been the leader of that patrol. He found the grey-green dragon standing among the others. "Is this true?" he asked.

WingTouch's eyes flickered the color of a sun-drenched sea, then darkened with sorrow. He flexed his wings restlessly. "We lost a lumenis grove and six dragons. I am sorry, Windrush. The Enemy's sorcery was stronger than ever."

Windrush exhaled a cold breath. Another grove lost. How many more could they lose? The Enemy was destroying the grounds that fed the dragons' bodies, even as it destroyed their spirit by hiding the Dream Mountain, the very source of life and beauty in the realm. "I see," Windrush said.

"Do you?" asked SearSky. "We are wasting time on this foolish search of yours, on your efforts to regain the past. Let us move on and win the future!"

Windrush was weary beyond words, but as their leader he could not let this pass. "You believe," he said, "that we are clinging to a forgotten past? Have *you* forgotten what the Enemy has taken?" He shifted his gaze from one dragon to another, letting the fire in his eyes speak his anger.

"Have you forgotten that without the Dream Mountain, this realm would not *exist*? That our gardens would be lifeless valleys? That lumenis would not grow? Have you forgotten that without the draconae, *there will be no more dragons*? Are you so blind that you have forgotten?"

He was answered by a muttering near silence. He heard raspy breathing, and the movement of claws on stone. Then a sullen voice—Stonebinder's?—protested, "What of the dracona in the Grotto Garden? There is an egg there!"

"One dracona, huddling in our protection!" Windrush roared. "An egg that will probably never hatch, away from the Mountain! Do you think *that is our* future?"

SearSky, eyes glowing red, turned his craggy head. "That has ever been your argument, Windrush. But we have been following your way, and we are losing. The Enemy seems to create life well enough without the Dream Mountain. Perhaps it is not so vital as you think. Perhaps you should think about another way. Unless—you have come to tell us of some new victory in your travels, eh?"

Windrush thought of the humiliation he had suffered in the cavern earlier tonight. "No," he said softly. "No victory." He vented sparks, trying to dredge some encouragement from his thoughts. "No victory, but perhaps a hope. Perhaps one who knows something of value to us."

He described to the others what he had found in the cavern, but he could see that most of them were only puzzled by it. What was wrong with them? he thought. Could they not see the potential value of the knowledge they might gain from the captive spirit? As he told how the episode had ended, he was answered with rumbles of disbelief. He hissed sparks of frustration.

"Windrush! We thought you were the master of underrealm skills!" This was Stronghold, the tan dragon to his left. "If *you* can't see through the Enemy's deceptions, how do you propose for *us* to defeat them?"

Windrush blinked slowly. He hoped that this was not turning into a challenge to his leadership; if it was, it could not come at a worse time. While they argued among themselves, the Enemy tightened his grip around their territory; and more importantly, around their hope and belief in themselves. This encampment stank of anger and hopelessness, and he had to answer it.

But he was having trouble focusing his gaze upon Stronghold, and he let out a breath of steam as he gathered his thoughts. "I have some skills in the underrealm," he said, his voice rising in volume. "But *never* have I claimed mastery of the arts of deception. That is the work of the Enemy. Those who admire such skills should give credit where it belongs—to their Master, the one who destroys! SearSky, you spoke of the Enemy creating life. Well, he might *twist* life to his purposes, but I do not believe that he can create it. You almost sound as if you believe his lies!"

His words sent a murmur of displeasure through the assembly. SearSky growled, "I have never believed the lies of the Enemy!"

Windrush glared back at him, and finally grunted in acknowledgment. It was true, SearSky had never been a servant of Tar-skel. But many of those gathered here, including his own brothers, *had* once been under the Enemy's sway—until Jael's victory at the Black Peak had freed them. They knew Tar-skel's dark mastery firsthand, but it was not something of which any of them boasted. Nevertheless, Windrush could not deny their right to question him. He had been foolishly unwary, and his encounter with Hodakai had been a minor display of the Enemy's powers.

Fire burned uselessly in his throat as he regarded the unhappy dragons. He was their leader, and somehow he had to find not just greater wisdom, but greater skill and cunning. At this moment, though, his thoughts were like a slow landslide of stones in his head.

He heard the low sigh of Farsight, the younger of his two living brothers. Farsight swung his head from side to side as he spoke, his silvery-clear eyes twinkling. "My brother, your scales and your eyes are as dull as a moon behind a storm cloud. When did you last take of lumenis?"

Windrush exhaled smoke. "Well, I—"

He felt a gentle shove on his right flank. WingTouch was staring at him with eyes that glowed like lanterns in the sea. Even in the face of defeat, WingTouch never seemed to tire or grow discouraged. "Fly, brother—fly and feed, before you fade away. We need you. Do you hear?"

A rumble of agreement rose among the others. Windrush realized suddenly how right his brothers were. He had not fed in many days, and he needed the restorative power of lumenis before he could think clearly. "Very well," he murmured. He raised his voice. "All who need lumenis, rise with me and fly!"

"*Fly now!*" called Treetooth, a dark green dragon.

"Fly and feed!" "Fly and feed!" The cry rose quickly, even among those who had questioned him. Most of the dragons present took to the air with a thunder of beating wings.

The Valley of Fallen Light lay eastward, just over the ridge from the main encampment. It was the largest lumenis reserve in the realm, and so far it had been kept safe from the Enemy. As

the dragons passed over the ridge, they encountered the guardian spell, one that would pass only dragons whose inner twists of true being, *garkkon-rakh*, matched its pattern. The weary Windrush was a beat slow in preparing for it, and it struck him like an invisible sheet of flame. *Foe! Foe!* it cried, as it wrapped its underweb sinews around him. Stunned by the spell's hot flash, he reached out with dragon thought to trace the grooves and twists of the spell. It required, not great skill, but an aware and true dragon presence. He touched the fire with his thought, and the heat vanished and he passed unharmed.

Followed by his two brothers and the rest, Windrush flew past the watchful guard dragons who maintained the spell-barriers, and descended into the Valley of Fallen Light. Even in darkness, the place glowed as though alive with fire. It boasted not just lumenis, but plants of all kinds, nourished by the fire of the lumenis. Even from the air, especially at night, the lumenis stems could be seen reaching skyward like silent branches of glittering, fiery ice.

Windrush dropped a wing and plummeted, murmuring under his breath the ancient words of beckoning: "Living fire, give breath to my wings! To my heart! To my eyes!"

A heartbeat later, he glimpsed one branch of lumenis that seemed to rise up beckoning to him alone. He felt its touch in the underweb, its energy flowing up to meet him. He reached down with his talons, caught the branch, and swooped back upward, pulling it from the ground. The plant sputtered with light as it broke free. All around him he saw sparkles in the night as other dragons caught up branches. Beating his wings, he climbed back into the sky before lifting the lumenis to his powerful jaws.

"Strength from fire!" trumpeted a dragon. The vale echoed with the sounds of dragons bellowing.

Windrush was too famished to celebrate. With a silent thought of gratitude, he crushed the lumenis like glass. The plant erupted between his teeth, melting into pure sunlight. It streamed in all directions; it coursed through his body like an elixir, filling him until he began to feel himself glow from the inside out. All around him, starbursts were exploding, and dragons were pulsing with inner light.

Fragments of lumenis flew across the sky like exploding embers, droplets of light raining down over the grove. Where they fell onto soaring dragons, the particles vanished with a sparkle into the dragons' scales. But fragments that fell to the ground exploded softly, each explosion the beginning of a new lumenis plant.

Windrush gladly let droplets of light spill from his mouth, seeding the grove. Energy flowed into his body and his mind together, driving out fatigue and burning the fog from his thoughts. Lumenis flame danced in his brain like an elemental; it had no thought, but it was the energy that fed life, fed all dragon thought and dragon being, all *garkkon-rakh*. He felt strength flowing into his wings, his eyes, and his claws. He might be unrested, but he no longer felt weary. Anyone who dared to attack him now would be destroyed by claw and flame. He bellowed his fury into the night air, and heard his cry echoed.

He was not just feeding; he was growing intoxicated with the power of the lumenis. He ground the remaining fragments between his teeth, squeezing the light from them. His spirits soared with every splash of light; he felt as though he could fly the breadth of the realm in the time it would take to shape the thought. He felt an overpowering urge to fly higher than a dragon could fly—to soar to the uppermost limits of the realm, to challenge the emptiness, the winds and the darkness beyond. His wings labored to carry him higher.

The cries of the others receded below him, an echo in his ears, a fading din. The threads of the underweb began to glow in his thoughts, and he felt an impulse rising in his mind: Why not challenge Tar-skel directly? Why not just reach out through all that was dragon and real and *garkkondoh*, and challenge the Enemy's magic, and defeat it once and forever? It was a dizzying thought. Enough wisdom remained in him to let it spin harmless into the night air—but the intoxication was still growing. And something else was happening . . .

A voice, somewhere, was calling out to him. It was a silent voice, and yet it reminded him of a dracona singing to him as of old, singing out a story, a vision of the realm as it was, or as it might be. Someone calling to him . . . but who?

Even in the euphoric glow, he recognized that something extraordinary was happening. This was not the usual lumenis intoxication. A power was coursing in his veins that he did not understand. Through the dizziness and strangeness, he felt a connection opening in the underrealm, and it was not under his control.

The realm was changing.

The darkness of the night grew deeper, and the points of light in the sky gleamed with a strangely cold intensity. They looked very far away. And yet, as he watched them, it seemed that they were being transformed into something different—not warm, distant lights, but rather tiny *points of ice*. And they were not isolated from each other, but were joined together by a pale, gossamer *web* that somehow stretched out of the underrealm into the outer world, and encircled the sky.

Windrush was so astonished that he stilled his wings and glided in the thin, high air, staring at the web. He could still see the dark outline of the mountain range, but the strands of the web were growing brighter, and the mountains were receding. What was this? He felt that he was seeing illusion, and yet not illusion. He smelled the power of an enchantment, but could not discern its nature, whether good or evil, nor could he tell its source. Perhaps if he flew higher . . .

He was far above the other dragons already, but still he beat the air, climbing toward the roof of the sky. The valley, with its popping lumenis, dwindled below. He was in danger of climbing out of the spells of protection; but still he climbed, hoping to make the vision come clear.

The web grew stark against the night sky. It seemed a peculiarly geometric thing—like the underrealm with its strands and connections, and yet hard and cool; and he thought suddenly that it was a vision of the realm bound together in power, and he felt an electric excitement. Was this a vision of dragon power—of the dragons' final victory, of the realm restored to unity?

No . . .

He smelled a tang of steel—and the web suddenly began to shrink, its points of light growing inward like daggers of sharpened ice. He felt his breath hissing, his link with the underrealm being choked off. This was no weaving of beauty; it was a thing of malice, of imprisonment.

And yet he sensed movement beyond the web. He heard the sound of chimes, the sounds of draconae, the sounds of the dreaming ones. For an instant he thought he glimpsed the Dream Mountain itself, rosy and translucent, and hope sprang into his heart. But it was locked far out of reach, beyond the web of ice.

Closer, in the web, he saw dragons caught, struggling; and the harder they struggled, the harder the ice became. Some fought with each other, and that made the ice grow thicker. It filled half the sky, closing around him. And now, beyond the web, the sky began to shiver and crack . . . and beyond *that* he glimpsed a different sky, the sky of another world. The ice crystals stretched, like clawed fingers, out of this realm to take hold in the next.

He shuddered, circling helplessly in the center of the vision. He glimpsed a new figure, not dragon yet glowing with dragon magic, climbing its way up the web. And he heard words drifting through the air:

*From beyond hope
will come one . . .*

*Innocent of our ways
will come one . . .*

The sound of the words faded, but not his memory of them. They were the Words of the

ancient prophecy, passed on through his father from his mother, the dracona Skytouch.

As Windrush pondered the Words, the new figure became clearer. He could see its form now: neither dragon nor beast, it was human. *Rigger*. His breath rushed out in a silent exclamation. Where the rigger touched it, the ice was melting. The glow of the Dream Mountain began to shine through more strongly.

The human turned her head. It was Jael.

But in that moment of recognition, she became transparent and disappeared. The Dream Mountain faded, and the icicle prison walled him in on all sides. It stretched out forever, through the fractured sky to the skies beyond.

Windrush could do nothing except circle angrily. Finally he roared and flew straight toward the wall of ice, his hot breath boiling the air before him. Better to die than to let this terrible work go unchallenged! But when his fiery breath touched the wall, it vanished. The shattered sky vanished, and the web; everything vanished except the night air whispering over his wings. He cried in protest, but his voice faded on the wind.

He looked down at the other dragons, a swarm of fiery insects in the valley below. He heard his name floating up on the air. Without answering, he searched the night sky one more time, looking for the source of that vision. Finally he gave up and spiraled downward.

As he rejoined the windmilling flight, he saw that the flush of the lumenis seemed to be wearing off most of the other dragons. "Did you see what I saw?" he rumbled.

"We saw you trying to fly to the summit of the world," answered Farsight. "What else was there to see?"

"A vision," Windrush murmured. "I'd hoped you might have seen it, too."

"A *vision*," crowed SearSky, flying up from behind. "Another work of your trickster friend?"

Windrush waited until the other dragon came alongside. "Whose work it was, I cannot say," he answered. "It could have been a taunt from the Enemy—but I think not. I believe it may have come from the Dream Mountain. It had a smell of prophecy about it."

As his words carried on the wind, a murmur passed through the flight of dragons. But SearSky was unimpressed. His eyes blazed like coals of fire beneath his knobby brow. "How can you judge it a work of the Dream Mountain, if you cannot tell a false vision from a true one?"

Windrush snorted sparks, not dignifying the insult with an answer. He peered around at all of the dragons. "What I saw was a great web encircling the world! A web of ice—ice as hard as stone, a trap of the Enemy. It stank of despair. I saw the Dream Mountain beyond it, out of reach. And then . . ."

He described what he had seen: the small human figure climbing and melting the web. And the Words. His voice became husky, rasping his own words into the air. "It was Jael!" he said, breathing a soft, billowing flame. "Jael, friend of Highwing, friend of the realm. She was undoing the work of the Enemy, which the rest of us were powerless to fight."

His words hung on the night air for a dozen heartbeats, before he admitted that Jael had vanished before winning against the ice and darkness.

"We heard your outcry," Farsight whispered, his diamond eyes flashing.

"My rage broke the vision. But it could not break what was *in* the vision. It was a power greater than our own." He let loose an angry flame and veered off into silence.

The others began to debate what he had told them, but Windrush stayed outside the circle. The air was soon filled with questions, not just about the vision, but about the past, about the truth of the Words, about Jael. "Do you doubt," Farsight said caustically to one questioner, "that Jael broke the Enemy's sorcery against Highwing? And against us?"

"So we have heard," came a rumbling reply. "We know that the enchantment was broken. But by whom? Who can say?"

Farsight snorted in disgust.

And on it went. Windrush had come to expect it. He had observed that few dragons seemed

to remember sacrifices made on their behalf, unless they were direct witnesses to the acts. There were many here whose spirits had been freed from the Enemy's influence—but perhaps not so completely as they would have liked. Despair and discord were powerful weapons of the Enemy, and they were present in good measure here.

Windrush circled silently, until he heard SearSky again question the source of the vision. SearSky was one who worried him. A formidable warrior, SearSky commanded considerable respect among the dragons; but not all of his followers were clear thinkers, in Windrush's view. It would be unwise, he thought, to let SearSky's words go unanswered. He veered back into the circle. "Whatever the source," he snapped, "the *vision* was real. And surely it had a meaning, which we must try to understand."

"And what, Windrush, do you take its meaning to be?" asked Longtail, cutting off a rejoinder from SearSky.

Windrush answered soberly. "I do not know for certain. Perhaps it was intended to frighten, or perhaps to warn. But its roots lie deep in the underrealm, that I know." He sighed and was suddenly aware of a great need for solitude, and for rest. "My brothers, I am weary—and so must many of you be. We will speak more of this later. But I will say this: What I have seen, I believe to be a thing of prophecy. I believe it bears upon the meaning of the Words."

He could hear the unspoken questions hanging in the air. Despite the terrible war with Tar-skel, few among the dragons spoke openly of the Words of the draconae—perhaps because the prophecy was so frighteningly ambiguous about the outcome of the struggle.

"And why should Windrush son of Highwing be granted a prophecy?" SearSky asked.

"Perhaps because I am also Windrush friend of Jael the rigger," Windrush retorted, punctuating his words with a blast of fire. "If you forgotten who broke the power of the Black Peak, I have not. If I have received a prophecy, it is not because I asked for it. Nevertheless, it was given; and if there is any wisdom left in this realm, we will consider it well." He exhaled a long, steamy sigh. "My brothers, I must take my leave. Are the night patrols ready?"

WingTouch flew close, bobbing in the air. "They are ready."

"Then farewell until the light of day."

Windrush soared away, departing the vale for the mountains to the north. His thoughts were deeply troubled as he flew, and he had the feeling that they would grow no quieter before this night was over.

Chapter 6

Battle and Betrayal

Once his older brother was gone, WingTouch departed also—to the west, back to the main encampment. These days, this was the most populous part of the realm. The air seemed full of dragons flying in one direction or another, and yet the realm was far from normal. The war had so overshadowed life that it was hard to remember what it had been like to fly freely in the night, seeking fast winds and adventure without wondering if the eye of the Enemy would fall upon you, or the wings of his drahl. The jumbled slopes were a windswept remnant of a land that had once borne countless varieties of flora and fauna—life that had mattered, not because it was of any particular use to the dragons, but because it was a gift from the fires of the Dream Mountain. Now, most of the life that had not been stolen or transformed by the Enemy was stunted or destroyed.

WingTouch was aware of this, but did not allow himself to dwell upon it as he flew. He had a patrol to lead, and he was determined that the defeat of the previous night would not be repeated.

The camp came into view over the ridge, marked by scattered fires and embers. WingTouch floated down through rising plumes of smoke and landed at the northern corner of the camp. He tramped through the grounds, calling out for his night patrol. As always, many dozens of dragons were asleep, or muttering in conversation around piles of blazing deadwood or burning *draxis* bushes, the poor cousin of lumenis.

Any number of dragons raised their craggy heads and peered at him with eyes glowing in the night like stars, but no one answered his call. WingTouch sighed, knowing that his dragons were undoubtedly somewhere in the camp, lost in conversation. Draconic discussions, especially when they turned upon the war and upon the powers and designs of the Enemy, could drone on throughout the night. WingTouch regarded most such talk as foolishness, and had little patience with it. Still, when he reached the far perimeter, he was not surprised to find two members of his patrol, Rocktooth and FireEye, perched on stone outcroppings, part of a small gathering absorbed in just such a conversation.

Rocktooth hailed him with a plume of smoke. "WingTouch! They are saying that the Enemy has been capturing shadow-cats from the valley and turning them into spirits that can move right through the earth!"

"Why not?" cried another dragon, behind Rocktooth. "If he can create drahl out of smoke, and cause the moon itself to spy upon us, I see no reason why he couldn't do that, too."

WingTouch answered with an impatient snort. "If you believe every story about the Enemy's powers, you'll make a sorry excuse for a warrior!"

"Then tell us what you believe!" said Rocktooth. "Stonebinder said he *saw* a shadow-cat come right out of the ground!"

WingTouch inspected his talons, dismissing the story with his silence. "What the Enemy is doing," he said finally, "I can't guess. But what *we're* doing is flying a patrol. Stretch out your wings and let's go."

Rocktooth grumbled, opening his jaws in a tooth-glittering yawn. "All right—but if we don't think of these things now, we might wish we had, later."

"We might," WingTouch acknowledged. "FireEye! You too."

FireEye slowly stirred, as though waking from a stupor, and blinked his red eyes. A stout dragon with thick, leathery wings, he was a good fighter—once aroused. Another dragon, hunched down in front of him, muttered, "I've heard that some of the *sweepers* are not to be trusted, either. Who knows about *their* sympathies?" FireEye, still only half alert, cocked his head and blinked his ruby eyes again as though ready to join in.

WingTouch was determined to let this go no further. He snapped, "*FireEye*—where are the

others? "Where are Loudcry and Longnail?"

"They're in the sleeping warrens," said the dragon who had spoken of the sweepers.

"Summon them," WingTouch commanded. "It is time to take to the air." As FireEye and Rocktooth rose to obey, WingTouch surveyed the camp, shaking his head. Even his friend Loudcry was sleeping when he should have been ready to fly. In a state of war, how could they be so unwatchful? WingTouch flexed his wings and considered reproving the others here, but decided that it was not his place. They were, after all, off duty. Nonetheless, he was troubled by the idle chatter. When the four of his patrol appeared, he breathed a few dark words about unpreparedness, then they took off and left the matter behind them.

The early hours of the patrol passed quietly, as they soared southward over the eastern face of the Scarred Mount Ridge. Beyond the ridge, some distance to their right, lay a sparsely inhabited plain known as the Valley Between, where they had fought for and lost the wild lumenis grove the other night. Neither the dragons nor the Enemy actively controlled the plain, but both flew there at times, and both claimed friends among the small winged flyers and shadow-cats that lived there. The known strongholds of the Enemy were much farther to the west, across the Valley Between and over yet another range known as the Borderland Mountains.

The night was calm but cloudy, without a hint of trouble. As it wore on, with endless gliding flight over dark, silent slopes, the temptation to relax grew almost irresistible. WingTouch found himself wishing, on patrols like this, that he had Windrush's gift for undersensing. He had at best a blurry awareness of the underrealm, and he had to depend upon sharp eyes and quick reflexes to detect and avoid danger.

Still, giftedness in the underrealm was a mixed blessing. Their father Highwing had been so blessed, and even Farsight, to a lesser degree. But none of them could have matched their youngest brother, FullSky—and that was warning enough. FullSky's underrealm gifts had led him to foolish temptations, and ultimately to his succumbing to the Enemy's sorceries. Even in that dark time when WingTouch and Farsight had lived shadow lives under the influence of Tarskel, they had lost all track of FullSky. He had vanished long before the victory at Black Peak, and by now, his brothers were certain that he was dead.

WingTouch knew that he himself was not much suited to thoughts of the underrealm. Even now, he was sure, there were many dragons awake discussing Windrush's claim to a prophetic vision. He himself had wasted little thought on the matter. He had no idea what Windrush's vision *meant*, but he believed in it and was content to let others wrestle with the subtleties of its meaning. His only duty right now was to remain alert until dawn and the end of his patrol.

It was only a little later, while winging over lowlands on the flank of the ridge, that he caught sight of something a less alert dragon might have missed: just a movement of shadow upon shadow, low in the foothills, barely enough to catch his eye. He swooped for a better view. He didn't call out to the others, because he wasn't sure he had really seen anything.

An instant later, the shadow suddenly loomed before him, with eyes and teeth. WingTouch banked sharply, barely evading the thing's claws. Turning, he spotted it fleeing to the west, close to the ground. "FOE IN THE TERRITORY!" he bellowed and dove after it.

The shadow was a drahl—fast and elusive, but not so fast that he couldn't catch it, WingTouch thought. He gathered fire in his throat, prepared to dispatch the abomination. But before he could do so, four more drahls climbed suddenly into the air to join the first. They turned to attack.

WingTouch swerved. His own comrades suddenly seemed far, far away.

* * *

Many mountains to the north, Farsight had just crossed a low ridge, winging his way homeward to his cavern. Over the sigh of the night wind, he thought he heard voices—voices

that didn't quite sound as if they belonged in this area. He was flying opposite to the direction his brother WingTouch's patrol had taken, a northwesterly course over the Scarred Mount Ridge. Far ahead, the Black Peak glowed sullenly over the northwest horizon. Listening carefully, Farsight veered into the west wind, scrutinizing the landscape below. It was a patch of thin, bedraggled meadowland, where in a better time wild lumenis had grown. Bordering it on the west was an undulating cliff where voices could easily echo for some distance.

Farsight swung his head from side to side, listening. There was nothing now, except the wind on the cliff. Could that have been what he had heard? He didn't think so; there was a smell in the air, an undersense of a presence that didn't belong here. Still, he couldn't quite identify it—except that it had a vaguely malevolent quality, and he was unwilling to leave without investigating more closely.

Employing a trick that Windrush had taught him, he drew a simple spellweb of silence about himself. He banked and glided, following the tingle in his awareness, until he felt the presence growing stronger. He dropped low over the meadow and landed, hoping to lose himself in the gloom. Then he gazed upward along the face of the cliff wall.

His ears found it before his eyes—voices whispering across the air. He peered up at an inky patch of shadow halfway up the face of the cliff. It was probably a ledge, a perfect place for someone to hide in the night, a perfect place for a secret meeting. Farsight realized suddenly that he heard both a dragon voice—and another, a voice at once husky and smooth, chillingly lilting, a voice shaped by magic. *Drahl*.

A drahl and a dragon talking together, almost inaudibly. He dared not move closer. For all he knew, there was a small army hidden nearby, preparing for an attack. Or had he stumbled across a pair of spies? He strained to listen.

The drahl's voice drifted, forming half-connected words: ". . . finest lumenis . . . (those with courage . . ." There was a rustling sound. The dragon spoke inaudibly, and the drahl answered, ". . . for *those*, servitude . . . little time left . . ."

The dragon's words were louder this time. ". . . they talk and complain . . . but haven't the courage to move . . ."

The drahl answered, ". . . no use . . . let them serve *us* . . ."

The dragon pleaded, "Let me speak again . . . close to persuading . . ."

Farsight realized what he was hearing—a drahl seducing dragons to the Enemy's side. He trembled with cold fury. He knew how reasonable, how persuasive a drahl's voice could be! Oh yes, he knew! It was nothing more than a dragon's voice twisted by sorcery, evil and yet beguilingly beautiful. He knew all too personally the power of the Enemy's seduction. But that had been a long time ago, before the Enemy's true nature had been revealed, before the drahls had begun to wage war upon the realm—killing dragons, destroying gardens and lumenis groves, destroying the very source of life to dragons. What was Tar-skel promising now, treasured lumenis for those who followed him?

If only he could identify that dragon's voice! If only he had his brother's undersense! Farsight strained, but the wind was rising again, rustling the grass of the meadow, carrying the voices away. Finally he decided that he had to move against the two, whatever the risk. He could not allow such treachery to go unchallenged. He sprang, and beat the air silently, climbing in the shadow of the cliff.

He had nearly reached the height of the ledge when reason overcame his rage. He was outnumbered. It was senseless to die and lose the knowledge he had just gained. He veered and glided back down into concealment, praying that he had not been seen. His heart burned with shame. It was *ungarkkondoh* to retreat from a battle that deserved to be fought. But it was far better that he return to warn Windrush, to let him know of traitors in their midst.

The breeze over the meadow floor was dying down, and as he landed softly near the bottom of the cliff, the voice of the drahl reached him again: "*Speak no more! Someone is here!*" Then

all was silent, except for the faint scratching of the dragon on the ledge.

Farsight kept utterly still, his eyes closed to slits. He heard a rustle of wings. Fire burned in the back of his throat. Find me and die, he thought, even knowing the advantage that an airborne adversary would have. It galled him to crouch like an animal in the grass. He hoped that the knowledge he'd gained was worth the sacrifice of dignity.

A pair of dragon wings caught the air with a snap, in insolent disdain for silence. He heard another flutter: the drahl taking flight. He craned his neck to watch the sky. He glimpsed a dragon's silhouette, flying southward, but the drahl he didn't see at all. When the sounds had faded, he took to the air.

He flew in search of the dragon for a time, but it had already vanished into the night. He thought of returning to the main camp to report, but instead finally turned northward again, back toward his own cavern. He wanted to discuss this with Windrush. His brother would be sleeping now, and badly needed the rest. But at dawn's light, Farsight would seek his counsel.

As he flew, he listened to the wind over the mountains and thought: What you must have to tell, Wind, if only I could understand your voice. And he thought of WingTouch on patrol, and hoped for the sake of the realm that his brother was having better luck tonight.

* * *

WingTouch had only an instant to decide whether to flee from the five drahls, or to fight. His reflexes decided for him. He banked right and climbed with powerful wing thrusts. When he glanced back, he saw the treacherous shadows in pursuit. The drahls were half a dozen lengths behind, and gaining.

Very well, he thought. He was still strong from the feeding; perhaps it was time to unleash some of that power. He climbed into the wind, faster and higher—then abruptly pitched up and over into inverted flight, and plummeted back upon the drahls. The ground loomed crazily over his head as he dove, breathing crackling flame into the enemies' midst. The drahls answered with freezing fire, but he scarcely felt the chill before they scattered from his mad assault.

He rolled upright and climbed again. He glimpsed his patrol above him, their breaths flickering in the night. "FOES BEHIND!" he cried. "FIVE DRAHLS, AT LEAST!"

He wheeled once more as his companions passed over him, and the five dragons joined in formation. The odds were evened; it was time to do battle.

The drahls were climbing quickly toward the dragons. They were not easy targets. The dragons dived, exhaling fire. The drahls wavered and darted, shadows in the darkness. The movements of shadow and dragon intersected, and suddenly all was chaos. The air reverberated with battle cries; the night flared with fire.

The dragons were stronger, the drahls more elusive. The dragons cried warning after warning to each other as they wheeled in the air, glimpsing one drahl here and losing sight of another there. WingTouch heard the sound of a drahl screeching in its death throes, but he could not tell who had made the kill. The battle was spreading out over the foothills, and he was dodging an attacker of his own. Shaking free of it finally, he turned back toward the others.

He spotted Loudcry grappling with a drahl—but above and behind Loudcry, another creature was dropping for a kill. WingTouch thundered a warning and sped to intercept the attacker. Before he could reach the drahl, he saw cold fire ripple along Loudcry's wings and heard the dragon bellow with pain. Loudcry stalled in midair, caught squarely by the terrible cold of the drahl's breath. The drahl he'd had in his grasp slipped away, as the one behind him billowed another freezing breath. WingTouch shot toward them, trumpeting his outrage. He dared not use his fire so close to Loudcry; instead, he caught the attacking drahl in his claws and, banking steeply, hauled the loathsome thing away from his friend.

The shadow squirmed in his grasp, trying to bite. He sank his nails into its body. At first, it

felt like nothing *but* shadow; then it turned suddenly into a repulsive, shivering thing. It continued to change, metamorphosing into the form of a dragon, an innocent fledgling. WingTouch felt sickened, knowing that it had once *been* a fledgling. He could not avoid a shiver of compassion and an urge to release it. As it arched its neck, he caught a glimpse of glowing eyes and an imploring gaze. But he knew its inner nature as it was now, no matter what it once had been. It was a servant of the Enemy, and it killed dragons. With a shudder, he drove his talons deep and ripped the thing's throat apart. Its death cry was hideous, but brief. It turned back into a shadow, a lifeless one.

WingTouch released it and looked for Loudcry. His friend was below him, cartwheeling downward—alive, but unable to fly. WingTouch dove after him.

The drahl that Loudcry had been grappling with earlier was slipping through the air toward him. WingTouch called in warning, but again the drahl was too close to his friend. Loudcry's eyes flashed as he spun, struggling to move his wings. He cried out: "Ki-i-ill it for me—kill them all! I'll be all ri—!" His words were strangled off as another icy flame washed over him. The dragon tumbled out of control, close to death. He was beyond WingTouch's help, falling toward the rocks below.

It took WingTouch several heartbeats to reach the drahl as it turned upward, screaming in triumph. It saw WingTouch in the instant the dragon's fiery breath enveloped it. Its cry turned to a screech of agony. It tried to squirm out of the flame, but WingTouch was upon it, and he caught its head and body with his claws and ripped it apart, flinging the pieces away in rage.

WingTouch looked frantically downward, where he had last seen Loudcry falling—and then up to where the rest of his patrol were fighting. He saw Rocktooth and FireEye close together, and heard Longnail's shout. Reassured, he dove toward the spot where he had last seen Loudcry. He boomed out a call, but there was no answering cry.

It came inside his mind—the sharp, final pain. He saw a glimmer down on the rocks, a dragon turning to crystal glass in the instant of death, before vanishing from the realm. Loudcry had just taken flight to the Final Dream Mountain.

WingTouch climbed back toward the remaining battle. He heard a screech as another drahl died, and Longnail's trumpet of victory. It gave him some consolation. A good dragon and friend had died, but the enemy were almost all disposed of. Just one more remained.

Perhaps it was the shock of Loudcry's death that dulled his alertness. When he felt the stab of pain in the center of his back, he was stunned senseless. He glanced back and saw the drahl's eyes gleaming over his shoulder in triumph. He drew a breath to shout, and the pain lanced up through the crown of his head. The drahl had slipped its claws between his scales and driven them deep between his wing joints. Its breath was close on the back of his neck. What was stopping it from freezing him? It was not breathing fire, but soft, vicious laughter.

WingTouch jerked his head around to try to vent his own breath on the thing; but it was well positioned, out of reach. It tightened its grip—and fire flashed through his body. "Brothers—!" he started to cry out, but he felt a freezing flame on his neck and heard, "*Die now if you make a sound!*"

He choked off his words, and tucked forward into a rolling dive, trying desperately to shake the thing loose. The drahl's nails held tenaciously, and its whispered voice cut through the wind. "*Descend . . . slowly . . . and silently . . . if you would live.*"

If you would live, WingTouch thought, the voice of the drahl chilling him as bitterly as its breath. What was it intending?

Its nails had found a nerve that commanded excruciating pain. Gasping, WingTouch descended in a glide, scarcely moving his wings at all. The torment eased a little. He hoped, with faint hope, that his fellows would see him and come to his aid. He strained to call silently: Come. Help. Quickly. But he felt no answering thought. If he could just snap out a quick cry. He began very slowly to draw a deeper breath—but the drahl's nail tightened on his nerve, driving the wind

from him. He wheezed, barely able to draw breath at all.

He heard the others calling in the night, for him and for Loudcry. But Loudcry was dead, and now he was as good as dead, too.

"We may let you live, if you do as we say," the drahl whispered, behind his head. *"You who have killed so many of ours."* Its voice was soft and measured, almost a chuckle.

I will kill many more of you before I finish, WingTouch vowed furiously, irrationally. The drahl laughed behind him. Had it heard his thoughts, or had he spoken aloud?

Through the haze in his mind, WingTouch thought how his brothers would grieve, and how badly they needed his help. The whole realm needed help, now more than ever. It needed all dragons who could fly against the Enemy.

"Fly to those shadows at the base of the ridge," the drahl whispered. WingTouch turned as he was told. He could still hear his comrades calling. Come, he thought. Help. Quickly. Their voices were growing fainter. They were flying in the wrong direction. If Windrush were here, he would know better; he would use his undersense. But Windrush was not here.

"Fly along the base of the hills, and turn west through the break. Let us hope that you are strong, dragon. You have a long journey ahead." The drahl laughed cruelly.

Come. Help. Quickly. The thought was dying in his heart. The shouts of his comrades were distant now. He was alone here, with a drahl who commanded his life and death. Should he end it now and try to take the enemy with him? That might be the better way.

But if he waited, there was always the chance that he would find an opening. Always the chance to learn something useful. Always the chance to escape.

It was a faint hope, but it was all the hope he had. That last spark of hope died when he saw a new cluster of drahls rise from the shadows and climb to join them in westward flight. In flight toward the home of the Enemy.

Chapter 7

Tracks in the Underrealm

Back in his cavern, Windrush found sleep eluding him. The lumenis vision had left him far too restless. He peered about the stone-and-spell confines of his cavern, noting that the sweepers had been busy in his absence, gathering up his fallen scales. The tiny creatures had left the ledges around the cavern adorned with their jewellike sculptures, his fallen scales twisted together into silvery shapes that balanced and pointed in odd ways, glinting in the gloom. Windrush had never attached any meaning to those decorations, and yet, in some way he could never quite fathom, they seemed tantalizingly suggestive of some deeper intent. Tomorrow they would be gone, carried into the dim crevices of the cavern to line the sweepers' nests.

Sighing, he sharpened his nails, raking them on the stone floor. It felt too cold in the cavern, too dark. A few patches of luminescent moss provided the only light. He peered into the hearth where a draxis bush stood and focused his thoughts there, until he had coaxed from the bush a burst of flames tinted with amber and ruby. The flames pleased him; they were the colors of distant suns.

It was only after he had stared at it for a time that the dragon understood his desire for the flame. A memory flashed through his mind: three small figures pacing before just such a fire, in this very spot. The rigger Jael, with her friends Ar and Ed, had visited this cavern one eventful night, far too long ago.

Jael. Human, rigger, friend. It was his father who had first befriended her. Highwing had recognized in a frightened young rigger the possible fulfillment of the Words—barely remembered by most male dragons, but held at the very heart's center of the song and history of the draconae. "*From beyond life will come one . . . without friend will come one . . . and surely the realm shall tremble.*" Jael, an outsider, had accepted Highwing's friendship; and soon thereafter, the silent corruption of Tar-skel had erupted into an open reign of terror. In punishment for trusting an outsider, Highwing was sentenced to exile and death in the static realm.

It was on the morning following the night in this cavern—the night when Jael had questioned a reluctant Windrush until he thought he would go mad, questioned him until he changed his mind and agreed to challenge the darkness—that they had flown together to the Black Peak to save Highwing. It stirred his blood to remember it—the trumpeting dragon cries, the fire and smoke, the flash of sorcery that hurled Highwing out of the realm with Jael in fast pursuit. And then . . . the anguish of waiting, fighting off Tar-skel's followers, until the riggers reappeared with the dying dragon. In the end, Windrush bore his great father on his own back, giving Highwing the precious moments he needed to die in triumph, with peace and dignity. . . .

The hearth fire danced before Windrush, throwing shadows about the cavern, shadows that jumped up to tower over him. Windrush gazed into the flames, mesmerized. He wished that the fire could help him unravel the knots of the day, or somehow transport him back to more fathomable times. He recalled the strange little parrot rigger, Ed, who had accompanied Jael—and he wished he could laugh at the memory. But laughter would not come to him, not from this fire. The flames danced bright and warm, but they seemed only to replay the puzzles of the day. What had it all meant: the demon, the vision? Even an iffling's explanation would seem clear compared to today's bewildering events.

He was scarcely aware that he was drifting in and out of sleep. It seemed as a dream to him when he first saw a small, silken-furred creature loping out of the cavern's shadows. The creature sat up on its hindquarters, peering up at him with huge, dark eyes. Windrush blinked, flexing his talons unconsciously as he tried to decide whether he was awake or asleep. "Iffling?"

"Dragon," whispered the iffling.

Windrush drew his thoughts together. "Did you hear me wish that you would come?"

The iffling blinked its dark eyes and shivered, its silvery fur rippling down its back. "We felt a need."

Windrush exhaled steam. "I hope you've come to explain the mysteries of the past day. Were they your doing?"

The being cocked its head. "My doing? Dragon, you would give us powers that are not ours. What is it that you wish to know?"

Windrush eyed the iffling. "You have to ask? I saw a vision tonight, a most disturbing vision. I hoped you would know where it came from. I also spoke with a demon who was once a rigger—and I wonder how I might gain its trust. Or should I? What can you tell me, iffling?"

The creature did not answer at once. It cocked its head the other way, its eyes half closed as though it were listening to some distant voice. It began to sway from side to side. It seemed to have forgotten the dragon's presence.

Suddenly it spoke, very softly. "I do not know all of the answers that you seek. But I can show you something. Follow me." It sprang toward the hearth and vanished into the air.

Puzzled, Windrush searched with his eyes, then probed with his thoughts down into the underrealm. He felt the quiver of an unfamiliar spell and was startled to discover that the underrealm surrounding the cavern had changed dramatically. A glow filled the cavern, penetrating into corners that had long lain in darkness. Where his own guardian spell had tightly closed the underweb against intruders, he now saw a doorway out of his cavern, leading to a place of sunshine. Sitting in the doorway, silhouetted in the sunlight, was the *kuutekka*, or spirit-presence, of the iffling. Behind the iffling was a vast green meadow. *What is this?* Windrush whispered, amazed.

The iffling's answer came soundlessly. *It is our memory of the place where the Dream Mountain stood before the Enemy stole it away. I know your question—but we cannot tell you where the draconae have gone, or even if they have truly moved at all. The Enemy obscures our sight of that place, and makes the way impossible to find. But . . . there may be other ways to find it.*

Windrush muttered, *If there were a way in the outer world, I would have found it by now! If you know some other way, I would be grateful if you told me!* He narrowed his undersight, trying to see more clearly the meadow beyond the doorway. He thought he heard faint singing, draconae singing. It felt more like a memory than an actual sound.

The iffling flickered in the sunlight. *Dragon, I am sharing with you our own vision, our memory, as clearly as I can. Unfortunately this is not a doorway through which you can pass.*

Windrush scowled. *If you can, why not I?*

Dragon, my undersight is not your undersight. I walk where you cannot; and where you go with strength and pride, I may go with great peril.

The creature paused. *You must find your own way. Not on wing, but in the underrealm. But take comfort in what I have come to say: You have more friends than you know.*

Windrush stared at the iffling, puzzled by its words. He recalled the lumenis vision, in which the realm had been lost to the Enemy. Who had created that vision? Was it a warning from the ifflings? A warning to act quickly?

You say I must search the underrealm, he replied at last. *I doubt that my skills are sufficient to the need.*

Windrush, your skills are the greatest of any dragon flying free in the realm today. And tonight, when you ate the lumenis, your skills grew.

Windrush blinked. *If you mean the vision . . . will you explain it to me?*

It was not from us, but from another. Know this: there is one who is trying to help. You must seek in the windows he has left you here. Find him, before it is too late! Start tonight! With those words, the iffling suddenly turned and bounded through the doorway and was gone. The

doorway vanished as well.

Windrush stared after the being, blinking in bewilderment at its parting words. What exactly did it want him to do? As he peered again about his cavern, his bewilderment grew. His haven was a changed place. There were openings in the weave of the underrealm, passages out of his cavern that did not exist in the outer world, that had not existed here before. Someone had cleverly penetrated his protective spells—someone who knew his mind and his thoughts. This was truly *rakhandroh*—astonishing, and most unnerving.

The passages were dark; he could not guess where they led, or what lay beyond them. But he sensed that they were windows onto other places in the underrealm. *Rakhandroh!* He caught hints of smells from them: salt and tree, sulfur and fire, wind and dust. As he sat and studied this puzzle, he came to realize that the passages might open further in response to his active touch.

After a long hesitation, he stretched out his thought to one dark passage. With a shimmer, the weave in the underrealm became an open window. Peering through it he glimpsed a barren land, a sun low and red in its sky. It looked remote, and oppressively empty and desolate. He pulled back, uncertain what sort of spell this was. Could his thoughts, his *kuutekka*, actually come and go through these windows? It darkened as he drew away.

He touched the next one with his thought. It opened to a view from a great aerie, high over a woodland. Yellow sunlight glinted from the tops of the trees, and shone from within the forest. He smelled a distant ocean, mingled with the forest smell. It was not a place he recognized. Most strange. He let the window close.

The next opened onto darkness, a subterranean gloom lit by a red flicker of distant fire, volcanic fire. He could not see much, but he sensed a labyrinth of underground passageways. He smelled sulfur; he sensed, though at a great distance, the presence of the enemy. He pulled back with a shudder and made certain that the window drew itself tightly closed again.

The fourth window opened onto darkness, also. But it was a kind of darkness he understood; it was the natural gloom of the underrealm. He could see connecting threads rippling outward, twisting and joining and stretching off in various directions. He was surprised by the clarity of the view. One thread seemed particularly bright and promising, and he thought he heard a faint tinkle of laughter from it. He sniffed cautiously—and thought he caught the smell of a demon-spirit. He was startled to realize that he recognized the smell. *Start tonight, the iffling had said. Find your way in the underrealm.*

Sighing, he stretched his *kuutekka* cautiously outward through the window, into the underrealm beyond his cavern. His thoughts ranged down the thread, searching and testing every knot he encountered, taking note of each change in direction. The laughter grew louder, but came to sound more like crying than laughter. In time, there was a faint yellow glow ahead, and the demon smell became stronger. Windrush sniffed the underrealm for treachery. He heard a faint metallic jangle of protection spells, but easily swept them aside. A moment later, a lazily dancing figure of light came into view. When he had last seen it, it had been a figure of shadow-fire, but there was no mistaking who it was.

Hodakai, he called.

There was no answer. The figure seemed to be stretching its arms and turning about, as though pretending to be soaring—diving and banking and climbing. He was muttering words that Windrush couldn't understand. ". . . *Vela Oasis off the port bow . . . let's take her straight on through, and leave the spiral arm behind . . .*"

Hodakai! Windrush shouted.

Gaaahhh! cried the demon, jumping and twisting around. *Who's there?*

The dragon hesitated. Surely *Hodakai* should have been able to see him—unless he was not manifesting his *kuutekka* visibly here. *Do you not recognize the presence of a dragon?* he inquired.

Dragon—it's you! Yes—of course I do! *Hodakai* gulped. *I was just—ahhh, testing your*

honesty!

Ah, said Windrush. *That is a good thing to do . . . Hodakai.* He repeated the demon's name deliberately—not that there was any real power in doing so. The demon, after all, had not *given* his name, and it was the willingness to be known that gave a name actual power. But there was no harm in reminding the spirit of how much he knew.

Hodakai seemed a little unnerved. *If you wish me to judge your honesty favorably, he grumbled, perhaps you wouldn't mind showing yourself.*

Windrush wasn't sure why he was invisible, but he didn't want to say that. He cleared his throat. *Considering your treatment of me when we last spoke, wouldn't you say—?*

The spirit twisted in space. *You come here interrupting my peace with your sorcery, and now you wish to discuss old grievances? Let me tell you—!*

I did NOT come to discuss old grievances! Windrush snapped, cutting him off.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Windrush didn't want Hodakai to regard him as a foe, if he could help it. However much the rigger-spirit hated the dragons who had captured him, it was Windrush's impression that Hodakai was not a committed ally of Tar-skel. *Perhaps, he rumbled, we can agree that your little trick on me was very clever, if not very hospitable.*

The figure of light danced, bending toward him. *So why have you returned to hide in the shadows harassing me?*

Windrush sighed, allowing his breath to escape in a plume that materialized before him in the underweb. The spirit pulled back, growling, *Don't try sorcery on me, dragon!*

I am not using sorcery on you, Windrush said in irritation. He didn't remember the rigger being so jumpy the last time they'd met. But if the plume of steam had become visible with his unconscious thought, then perhaps he could materialize an image of himself, as well. He recalled his own face as it appeared to him in the surface of a still pool. He felt his kuutekka become solid, a craggy, silver-scaled head with faceted green eyes, glowing nostrils, and enormous jaws. *There, he said. Is that nonthreatening enough?*

Hodakai twitched and danced wordlessly.

Can you see me all right now?

Is that supposed to be funny? Hodakai snapped.

I would not presume to attempt humor with you, one called Hodakai. From your reaction, I will assume that you can see me.

Okay, I can see you. Why are you here?

I have come . . . Windrush paused and thought a moment . . . *to ask whether you are in service to the one who is called Nail of Strength.*

Hodakai snorted. It sounded like a flame sputtering in the wind. *I am in service to no one.*

But you are held captive by those who are in service to the Nail of Strength.

I am the captive of dragons! Hodakai screamed. *Don't talk to me of the Nail of Strength! I am imprisoned by dragons! It was DRAGONS that took my body from me!*

*But—*Windrush pointed out—*dragons in service to the Enemy, not to the realm.*

It took a moment for Hodakai to calm down enough to reply. *So you say. I only know that those who imprison or threaten me are my enemies.*

Including me, I suppose!

What have you done to make me think otherwise?

Windrush thought about that for a moment. He supposed what the spirit meant was that he hadn't set it free. But in truth, he doubted that he could break the spell of the spirit jar even if he wanted to—and if he could, it would only end the spirit's miserable life. Was that what Hodakai wanted? *I have learned your name, and not used it against you,* Windrush pointed out.

You took my name. I never offered it, nor did you offer me yours.

That was true enough. It had briefly occurred to him to offer his name, but he had no reason to expect Hodakai to respond in friendship. Still, *something* made him feel that Hodakai might be

turned to the cause of the realm. He needed to offer some gesture of peace.

He cleared his throat. *I'll not deny your words, spirit. But remember—whatever the harm done you, it was done by those who are my enemies, as well. If you would strike back at your captors, you could do so by joining those who stand with me. You would not be the first . . . rigger . . . to do so.*

The spirit's flame turned reddish orange. *Help you? You're mad, dragon! Can you give me my body back? Do you think I don't know what you want? You search for your precious Dream Mountain, and you think when you have it you'll cast me aside. But you'll have no help from me! Not for you or your kind! Now, go away and leave me to my peace!*

Is there nothing that would change your mind?

Nothing, dragon. Go away!

Windrush stared at the spirit, his weariness returning. He was wasting time here. Hodakai was too bitter. And yet, he was sure that Hodakai could help them if he chose to. *Very well. But perhaps, Hodakai, we will speak again.*

The spirit flickered toward him, as though to issue a lashing retort. But its voice sounded almost wistful. *Perhaps, dragon. I do not foretell the future. Now, good night.*

Windrush nodded. Hodakai, and then Windrush's own image, vanished as he drew away through the underrealm.

* * *

In the darkness of his cavern, Windrush gathered his thoughts. Surely he had done enough today! But he knew he would not be able to rest. Three other windows beckoned. And he remembered the urgency of the iffling.

He chose the window that had opened onto a barren wilderness. Something there seemed to call to him, something beneath his conscious awareness. Drawing a deep breath, he slipped his kuutekka through that window.

He tasted aridness. Hot wind sighed over stone. Heat clamped around him like a mantle, and he felt the grit of dust and the hardness of rock beneath him. A sun was low and smoky red in the sky. He was in the underrealm, but it felt like the outer world, though a place unfamiliar to him. What had called him to this forsaken place? He stretched out his senses for any track of friend or foe, any sign of magic or sorcery. He felt nothing.

He moved cautiously through the broken landscape, shards of a land that felt as if it had once harbored life and abundance. Was this another place that had been ruined by the Enemy? Or was it simply a land where life had been spent and time had moved on? It was impossible to tell.

He chose no particular direction, but allowed the land to lead him on. It was a place of tumbled and carved stone, a maze of ravines that even a tracker-dragon would find confusing. And yet, he felt that he might find treasure in this maze, if he followed the feelings that were coursing in his veins—as he had followed the urge that led to the lumenis vision.

He caught a hint of a memory-smell, the faintest whiff on the air. Was it the beginning of a track? Perhaps. For some reason, he found himself imagining Highwing whispering silently to him from the Final Dream Mountain, urging him onward. He shook his head. There was too much peril here to be dreaming of those who had fallen before him.

The landscape deepened and began to seem like a terrain of *thought*, runneled and carved, not by wind and water, but by years of pain. Once, he thought he heard angry laughter echoing over the tops of the ravines. It faded, but later he thought he heard music, the music of the draconae, and this time he was sure that it was an echo from long ago, somehow carried on the wind. That too faded. Other whispering sounds of memory seemed to rise and fall, never quite catching hold in his thoughts. He began to feel that he was creeping along beneath the winds of the past, the winds of time.

A little later, those winds brought him something new—a *presence* that felt, somehow, familiar. It made him think again of Highwing. Since his father's death, he had often thought that he'd felt his father's spirit with him, encouraging him in the struggle. And yet this was different: it was as though his father, or someone who reminded him of his father, were actually nearby.

Are you there? he whispered softly, not wanting to awaken the wrong presence.

In answer, he heard the sighing of the wind. But the wind seemed to speak. *I am here*, it whispered. *Trying* . . . And then the words faded back into a lifeless sigh. Was that all it had been—the sound of the wind? Windrush felt flame tingle in the back of his throat.

Trying?

The wind gusted suddenly, and a cloud of dust whirled up from the ravine ahead of him. As the dust spun, the air slowly cleared and in the place of the dust he saw a face—the face of a dragon. He gasped in recognition. It was a male face, but shimmering and near-crystalline, almost like a dragon's. The eyes were dark, like wells of emptiness.

FullSky? he whispered in shock. *FULLSKY?*

It seemed an eternity ago that FullSky had vanished. Windrush's heart trembled at the thought that his brother might still be alive. He rushed forward, sure that the apparition must be unreal.

Stay! the dragon's dark eyes seemed to warn. Come no closer!

Is it you—my brother? Windrush asked, barely able to contain his grief and wonder. *We thought you were dead.*

The other dragon gazed at him with what seemed an expression of exquisite pain. He shook his glassy head. Not yet, his eyes said. Not yet.

You're alive! Windrush breathed. *But you cannot speak?*

There was no answer, but the eyes agreed. FullSky glanced meaningfully up into the sky.

Danger near? Windrush drew a sharp breath. *Dream Mountain?* he whispered. *Can you help us find the Dream Mountain?* His brother nodded slightly. Windrush felt dizzy with astonishment. But he remembered as if it were yesterday—FullSky's powers of the underrealm were like no other living dragon's. He thought suddenly of the lumenis feeding. *The vision! Was that your doing?*

His brother's eyes met his, but were unreadable now, and somehow unutterably distant. With a pang, he realized how much he had missed that annoying trait in his brother. He had never been able to tell what FullSky was thinking. He would give anything to know now. *Was it a message from you?* he breathed.

His brother's kuutekka rose large before him, those dark, bottomless eyes seemingly focused in another realm entirely. Yes, they seemed to say, he had had a hand in the creation of the vision. What did Windrush think?

Windrush remembered suddenly the iffling telling him of one who was trying to help. Had it meant FullSky?

FullSky's eyes shifted and grew wide with alarm. Go! his gaze cried almost audibly in Windrush's mind. You must seek help from beyond the realm!

Wait! Windrush protested. *We have to find the Dream Mountain; we are lost without it! Can you help? Where are you? How can I find you again!*

His brother's gaze was like the fire of lumenis. Go! it cried. Seek help! Then, without any perceptible change in the underweb, he was gone. The ravine was empty.

Windrush hissed in dismay. He crept forward, looking for any remaining sign of his brother's presence. But FullSky's kuutekka was gone without a trace. Had he not actually seen FullSky, seen those eyes . . . But Windrush had no doubt he had just seen his brother alive—no more than he'd doubted the lumenis vision.

Looking skyward, he saw a formation of dark clouds coiling strangely. There was a terrifying sensation in the air now, the underrealm ringing soundlessly, as though a great change were

coming, a power moving nearby, approaching from beyond the ravine. Some servant of the Enemy—or perhaps the Enemy himself? Windrush sensed that it was looking for him and knew that he was here, but perhaps did not yet know precisely where. And perhaps it did not yet know his name. FullSky's command echoed in his mind: *Go!*

Windrush turned and fled the way he had come, with the speed and silence of thought. Within moments he had left that place behind—and the underrealm as well. Emerging in the outer world, he stared in hissing astonishment at his own cavern, glowing redly about him in the light and silence of the hearth.

Chapter 8

Children of the Iffling

For a long time afterward, the dragon lay staring at the draxis burning in his hearth. It seemed that the more he learned, the less he understood. First the demon. Then the vision. Now the strange paths of the underrealm, and his lost brother. FullSky! Still alive! But where was he, and what was he doing, and why? *Seek help from beyond.* Clearly FullSky was aware of the struggle, and was on the side of his brothers. Had *he* created those pathways?

Windrush sensed footsteps nearby. "Iffling," he murmured, shifting his eyes. "Have you observed my efforts since we last spoke?"

"We know that you moved in the underrealm," the iffling answered. "Did you learn anything helpful?"

Windrush rumbled thoughtfully. "Helpful? Who can say? I met my brother FullSky, whom I had thought dead! The lumenis vision was his work. He seems to want to help us, but is hindered somehow."

"Ah," whispered the iffling, dark animal-eyes blinking. "Indeed!"

"And he said that I must seek help." The dragon hesitated. "From beyond the realm."

The iffling seemed to tremble.

"That is what he said," Windrush repeated, suddenly thinking: *From beyond life will come one. Jael!*

"Did you learn . . . anything . . . of the Dream Mountain?" the iffling whispered.

Windrush shook his heavy head. He dug with a foreclaw at the stone floor of his cavern. He knew now whose help he must seek. But he didn't know how. The iffling swayed, waiting for him to speak. Windrush drew a breath. "I cannot tell you how terribly I miss my friend Jael—how often I have wished that she could return to aid us, as she aided my father!" Windrush's breath whistled in and out as he jabbed at the unyielding stone with his talon. "And now the vision, the Words, FullSky—everything says to me that she *must* return, if we are to have any hope. Perhaps she can find the draconae, where we cannot. Perhaps she could appeal to the rigger-spirit, Hodakai, to share his knowledge with us. Perhaps," and his voice became husky, "she could unite us, as we cannot seem to unite ourselves."

When he looked at the iffling, he was surprised to see its dark, oversized eyes moist as though with grief. It was blinking slowly and repeatedly, in apparent distress. "Dragon Windrush . . . what you seek *may* be possible. But we dared not try . . . without knowing."

Windrush cocked one eye down at the creature. How much *rakhandroh* could he experience in one night? "*Iffling!* You know a way to reach Jael? Why haven't you said this before?"

The iffling craned its neck to peer back up at him. "Dragon, please—we seek the Dream Mountain as much as you do."

"That is not what I asked."

The iffling trembled. "It is far from sure. There are grave risks. I cannot say for certain. I cannot say."

"Do not toy with me!" the dragon roared.

The iffling flickered, losing its solidity for a moment. Windrush flared his nostrils angrily. The iffling seemed to regain its strength. "There is one way that we might be able to reach out to her world. But it could cost us dearly, dragon—more than you can know. I must return to speak with the others."

Windrush squinted. "What is this cost that you speak of?"

The creature became transparent, then a thin flame dancing in the air. "That," it whispered, "must be our concern alone. Dragon, what we can do, we will. But do not abandon your search! It may yet be the thing that will save the realm!"

"But—" The flame was gone, before Windrush could complete his question. He stared at the spot where the iffling had stood. Rakhandroh! But as exasperating as the ifflings were, he knew he would hate not to have them as allies.

At last he vented steam from his nostrils. I hope the cost is not *too* great, he thought. Farewell, iffling.

The draxis-fire was burning low. This night had drawn on long already. He closed his eyes, thinking of the underrealm windows that awaited him. Before the thought was finished in his mind, he had drifted into an unquiet sleep.

* * *

The ifflings spoke softly but urgently together, their thoughts murmuring in the flickeringly luminous place that was their home in exile. There was a great disturbance among them. Whatever they decided, there must be no delay.

The path to the Dream Mountain must be found, or it would not be just the dragons who faced the choice of dwindling and dying, or being transformed by the Enemy into something ungarkkondoh. The ifflings too would fade from existence if the Mountain were not found, if they did not rejoin the heartfires from which they had sprung. But even if they succeeded, even if they brought the One of the prophecies back to the realm, the sacrifice required could threaten their own survival. They had so little strength left before their own fires were exhausted!

And yet, if they refused, the future seemed clear. The dragons were foundering in the struggle. The dragons' strength, already failing, would die as their deeper vision and wisdom grew clouded, as the prophecies were lost. Too many of the draconi had already forgotten their history and their knowledge of why the draconae were important, beyond reproduction of their kind. And even for that last, many had already lost their concern. They cared now only for some hollow notion of victory, as their numbers dwindled and lumenis was destroyed by the Enemy. The draconae *were* their wisdom; without the draconae, they were missing the heart of what made them dragon, garkkondoh. Even the ifflings missed the songs and tales of the draconae!

Nor was it just the dragons and ifflings who were endangered. From the tiny cavern sweepers to the trees and shadow-cats and flyers of the forests, to the distant denizens of the seas, all creatures of the realm were falling under the shadow of the Nail—and not just the creatures, but the realm itself. It could survive without ifflings, maybe, but never without the dragons to defend it. And if the realm fell, the Enemy would gain complete control of the underrealm—and more than that. The ifflings had glimpsed the vast web of power that the Enemy was spinning, a web that could reach across the twists and layers and folds of reality into entirely different realms, perhaps even the static realm of Jael and her people. That was what the ifflings had seen in Windrush's vision—FullSky's vision. Not until this night had they truly understood the Enemy's avarice, or the reach of his claw. It seemed that more of creation than they had imagined might be threatened by the one who called himself Tar-skel, the Nail of Strength.

Therefore, they must do what they must. They might even die as a result—but if they did not die now, what would life under Tar-skel be, if not a living death? Should they not therefore act as they could, in keeping with the Words, to bring life to the ancient prophecies?

The discussion seemed to go on for a very long time, flame mingling with flame, the glow flickering around them, brighter and dimmer. As might have been measured by any others, the debate took hardly any time at all. The voices whispered:

—*to touch the static realm with our thought—*

—*to be heard there—*

—*we must send the children—*

—*the last!—*

—*but only born into that place can they seek out and speak to the One, where she dwells—*

*—and if they fail, there will be no others, none to seek out the Dream Mountain—
—and without its fires, there can never be others—
—no other children—
—but if we do not send them, the Nail will triumph. Shall we save them, only to be the last to
search and struggle in vain?—
—they must go—
—but first let us reach out with our thought to listen, to find the One!—
—we have listened—
—we sense her dreams and her longings for this place—
—then let us begin—
—without fear—
—to prepare the children for their perilous path—
—to send them out alone—
—if only there were a way to go with them, to protect and guide—
—there is none—
—we must teach them in their very conception, and then trust them—
—there is no other way—*

And in the end, they began the process, as they had feared all along that they would, turning inward the last of their strength toward the one great task still within their power . . . the creation of the last children who could ever be spawned, the last new ifflings—until the day came, if it ever did, when their life energy could be regenerated in the dreamfires of the Mountain.

The creation of the children was a thing of mystery, only partially under their control. The forces of space and time responded to their urgings, twisting and curling and knitting together in new and sometimes unexpected ways, piercing through the layers and boundaries that separated realm from realm, underrealm from underrealm. Only in this creation-act were the realms brought so close to one another, made so intimate, one to another. As the iffling-children took shape in that ephemeral boundary-realm, they were blessed—or burdened—by a gift of knowledge from their elders, an awareness and a terrible need impressed upon the very core of their being.

In the final moments of creation and birth, the ifflings, in an agonizing act of will, turned their children out—dispatching them not to a place of security where they might safely grow to fullness, but rather across a fleeting opening into the static realm, into the strange cold universe where the rigger Jael lived. . . .

* * *

They were born like winks of light in a universe to which they were strangers, even in the deep memory of their heritage. They were five in number, dancing and twinkling in the darkness of the void. For a time there was no understanding among them: life came first, and then sight and hearing and thought, and only gradually memory and dawning consciousness, and finally an uncertain kind of understanding.

They grew and matured, floating in the darkness, drinking the radiance of the nearby (distant!) sun. There was a cooler world close by, and in time they were drawn toward it as though toward home. There was one they must find and meet there, one to whom they must speak, though they did not yet comprehend exactly what it was they would say.

They skated on space and time like water-skimmers over a pond. They would find their way, and deliver their message.

Their message was crucial. Nothing must stop them, nothing living or dead.

* * *

*** Accursed ifflings. ***

Far across the realm and the underrealm, another felt the stirrings in the space-time boundaries, felt the sudden emergence of new life in the iffling-children, felt the ripples of their breakthrough into the static realm. This one's heart and being were as closely tied to the fabric of the underrealm as the ifflings', and it knew instantly that it had just felt a shift in power, a shift that it recognized as the genesis of a profoundly important event. It felt the stirring and rippling of the iffling-births as a movement toward the long-awaited, long-dreaded fulfillment of the prophecies:

*From that one
comes a beginning*

*From that one
comes an ending*

And most surely the realm shall tremble.

No one knew better the Words as they had been born, ages ago, in a vision from the Dream Mountain. No one had pondered more deeply upon their truth and ambiguity.

*The one will fall
as the battle is fought*

*Upon her death
is the ending wrought.*

No one had thought harder, with more fear or more hateful hope, upon the reappearance of the One from beyond the realm. That reappearance was to be the crisis point about which the ending, for better or worse, would turn. In no way did the Nail intend to leave the summoning and the arrival of the One in the care of iffling-children.

*** Rent! I require you! ***

There were ways to take control of a situation even when it had passed out of the realm itself. The ifflings were not the only creatures who could, at need, project their presence into the static realm.

As dragonlings had been twisted into drahls, so could other beings be transmuted to suit the needs of the one called the Nail. It was time that the near-iffings, the cavern sprites, be put to use in the life to which they had been born. Rent could perform the actual work, under the Nail's supervision. The sprites would be altered, strengthened, made shrewder and more cunning and ferocious. They would be reborn into a life of long journey—a journey of pursuit, and deception, and if need be, destruction. They would become false-iffings, warriors of fire—transformed in the turbulence of the underrealm, molded by the one who would soon control not just the underrealm, but *all* of the realms.

They would follow the iffling-children, and the result would be most satisfying. The demon Jael would come, yes. But not to the fulfillment of the Words as the dragons clung to them.

The Dream Mountain would be kept safe from the dragons and the ifflings. And the realms would be his.

*** Rent, I require your assistance NOW. ***

In the cold darkness of the void, the warriors of fire took form and grew quickly to the fullness of their strength. Led by one called Jarvorus, the strongest and shrewdest of them, the false-iffings shone like icy diamonds in the dark as they drew their given memories from hidden places within, and searched for their direction in this strange realm into which they had been born. They sensed somehow that they were different from their forebears, that their heritage had been changed for them; they were special creations under the command of one who was never to be challenged. This was good and proper and right. It was the destiny for which they had been born.

Casting their senses outward, they soon discovered the nearby others, the ones they were instructed to defeat. They did not move against these others yet, but observed them, biding their time. Like the iffling-children, the warriors would search for their quarry, the one about whom victory and defeat would soon dance like a spirit in a jar.

Shadowing the unsuspecting iffling-children, they learned the skills of movement with their bodies of light, and they dreamed of the new bodies into which they might transform themselves when the need arose. Skating on space and time, they followed the iffling-children, moving toward a world that floated blue and innocent against the eternal night.

* * *

It was sometime during the night—he was not sure precisely when—that Windrush stirred in his sleep and felt a presence close by. He opened one eye, without lifting his mind from the dreamland of sleep.

It came as a flame this time, and it flickered, as though in weariness. It danced with a sence of urgency that caused him to awaken enough to speak. "Iffling?" he whispered.

Dragon. It has been done, all that we can do. She will come, or not. We can only hope, and trust. The iffling's flame dimmed, then flickered a little stronger.

Windrush regarded the being in silence. "Will you not tell me what you have done?" he murmured finally. "Will you not tell me, so that I may hope?"

There was an almost imperceptible sound, a mournful sound. The iffling shimmered, trying to become a soft, sleek animal; but it was unable to hold the form. As a flame, it whispered, *Messengers have been sent—at great cost, dragon. If they succeed, value their work well! Much has been sacrificed that they might do so. And much will yet be sacrificed—and by none more than by your friend Jael.*

Windrush peered at the iffling, uncertain how to respond.

Do you not know the Words? the iffling asked, sensing his uncertainty. *"The One will fall as the battle is fought; upon her death is the ending wrought."* *Do you not know these words?* The iffling dimmed with the question.

Windrush stared at the iffling, dumb with horror. If he had heard those Words, he had long ago forgotten them. Had he called for his friend to come to their aid, only that she might die? For an instant, as he stared at the iffling flame, he felt its spirit touch his with something like understanding, as though it were a dragon and their gazes had met. He felt in the iffling a fathomless loss, and low keening grief, and a terrible fear for its own kind. And yet, beneath all that, deep within the well of its soul, he glimpsed a ray of hope.

If the iffling could have hope, he thought, then so too could he. The dragon drew a breath and the connection was broken. He said very softly, "For the dragons, I thank you. Go and rest, as will I. Iffling, farewell."

Farewell, Windrush. The iffling darkened and was gone.

Windrush stared into the emptiness of the cavern where the creature had been, and despite his words, he knew he would have no more rest this night.

End of Book 2 excerpt

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