

# Chapter 1

Jeremiah balanced on top of the wall at the western border of Omondei. He greeted each dawn like this, peering along Ban-Mak as far as he could, waiting for the chance that had to come – the chance for him to leave Omondei on a grand adventure.

Because Jeremiah knew, as surely as he knew anything, that he was going to leave. He was going to make his name fighting dragons and trolls, he was going to do something that would make his life not quite so ordinary.

“Jeremiah!”

His father Morgan’s voice broke into his reverie, the strong deep tones jarring Jeremiah out of his daydream. He climbed easily down his makeshift ladder of old barrels and crates and ran to meet his father. Morgan was standing in the middle of the road, arms crossed, foot tapping impatiently. A hint of a smile was almost lost in his thick, dark beard.

He towered over the much smaller Jeremiah. But for the matching twinkle in their eyes no stranger would ever guess that the two were related.

Morgan was dark, and stood head and shoulders above every man in the village. He was heavily built and carried the signs of a man who worked out of doors most of the time. His hands were rough, his skin darkly tanned, his clothing functional and worn rather than fashionable. Yet for all his ruggedness, he was gentle and good-natured, and never far from a smile.

Jeremiah, on the other hand, was small and fair, a little shorter and quite a bit skinnier than the other boys his age. His eyes were the most remarkable thing about him. It was impossible to say what colour they were. They changed from the palest of blues to the darkest green and everything in between, according to the weather, and to his mood.

Though small for his eleven years, Jeremiah was strong as a result of his daily chores on their small farm. His pale skin was tinted pink from the sun, and rough. Like his father's, his clothes were worn, but serviceable. Long, shaggy hair and clothes in need of patching betrayed the absence of a woman in the house.

Jeremiah stood now, rubbing one bare foot along the other as his father spoke to him sternly.

"What have I told you about that wall?" Morgan asked.

"Sorry, Father."

Morgan grunted his acceptance of the boy's apology.

"The pump's clogged again, so I need you to get water from the square."

Jeremiah picked up the bucket at his father's feet and dashed off to the fountain. He loved the grandeur of the square and the way it dwarfed the rest of the village.

Jeremiah darted along the street, cobbled with perfectly round pebbles, not a single one bigger than a hen's egg. It was swept every day by the occupants of the identical little houses, built of rough stone and split beams, with thick thatch roofs that lined the street.

Omonde was neat and pretty and pleasant, but the town square was magnificent. It was dominated by a large marble fountain, which spouted water cheerfully. At its centre

stood a statue of a long-forgotten hero. Although the inscription had worn off and no one could remember who he was or what he had done, the statue itself was impressive, and spoke of a time when the sheltered village had held a place in the world. Jeremiah often came here to admire it.

The statue was of a man in a military uniform – jodhpurs, riding boots and a smart fitted jacket neatly buttoned up to the neck. He stood leaning casually on the hilt of his sword, as anyone else would rest on a cane. Under his other arm he held a cavalry helmet, showing a coat of arms which had by now all but worn away.

The casual dignity with which the man had posed for his statue captured Jeremiah's imagination. What great deeds was such a man capable of? What could he not have done? Jeremiah loved to stare at him and invent adventures for him – some realistic, of battles and military manoeuvres, and some fantastical, of fights with fiery dragons and evil witches.

Today was all business though. He'd already been caught at the wall; he didn't want to be caught daydreaming here too, and the village children delighted in ratting him out to his father.

He'd never understood the other children, who were all just as happy as their parents to stay within the confines of the village. Only Jeremiah ever thought about the outside world and the possibilities it held, and it made him a target of fun with the others.

He filled the bucket and made his way home quickly, trying not to slosh the water out. It was only when he dipped a jug into the bucket to fill the kettle back home that he noticed a small newt swimming lazily about in the water.

Jeremiah fished it out and allowed the salamander-like creature to slither out the window. Focused on his daily chores, he barely registered the faint “Thanks,” from outside. He filled the kettle and lit the burner, then turned to get started on breakfast.

The rest of the day passed in the customary blur of chores set out by his father. Keeping the tiny farm going and the house in good repair took up almost all of Jeremiah and his father’s time. Like most of the villagers, they grew just enough food in their own yard to keep themselves going. Besides the small vegetable patch, a few chickens, and the one milking goat, they kept a drove of pigs which they bartered with their neighbours for goods like bread and cloth.

It was only once he'd had his supper, washed up and gone to bed that Jeremiah remembered something odd had happened. He tossed about, trying to place the little niggle that had crept into his mind. But what had caused it was lost to him. Eventually he gave up on sleep altogether and shuffled down to the kitchen to make himself a hot spiced milk drink. He took it into the front yard and stood breathing in the spices along with the cool night air.

“Hello! I was wondering when you were going to show your face again.”

Jeremiah looked around frantically, trying to find the owner of the voice.

“Oi!” came the voice again, “Down here!”

Jeremiah looked down. Sitting next to his foot was the very same newt he had accidentally brought home from the fountain. Its large black eyes were focused firmly on him. Jeremiah blinked slowly, a frown creasing his face. He picked up the newt and inspected it closely.

It was no different from any of the other newts that lived in these parts and occasionally found their way into in the well water. It was dark blue and had a thin black and white spotted band along its side. It had a yellow belly, a short flat head, large eyes and a thin crest along its spine. No surprises so far. Except that it hadn't moved since Jeremiah had picked it up. Most newts would have tried to run or bite by now. This one sat on his palm, staring at him expectantly. Finally, and very slowly, as though he had to force himself to say this much, Jeremiah asked, "Excuse me, but did you just speak to me?"

"Of course I did," replied the newt, "My name's Wilfred. How d'you do?"

"I'm sorry," Jeremiah said, "I just didn't know that newts could talk." Jeremiah glanced suspiciously at his milk. Maybe he'd managed to mix some of his dad's brandy in with it. In all his life, which admittedly had not been that long, he had never heard a newt talk. This one was, and it didn't seem likely to shut up.

"They're not very talkative around here are they?" it was saying.

"Um, no," replied Jeremiah. He didn't really feel up to saying anything much more intelligent than that. His brain seemed to have been replaced with creamed spinach.

"I suppose it doesn't really matter," said Wilfred, "since I have your attention now."

"Um, yes," said Jeremiah. *Blop blop*, went the creamed spinach.

"You're not very bright, are you boy? Just my luck if the only person to hear me is a few piggies short of a farrow."

"My name is Jeremiah, not boy," said Jeremiah, indignantly. "And I have plenty of piggies, thank you very much. I'm not faced with talking newts in the dark hours every day, am I?"

“Well, that’s a relief,” said Wilfred.

“Why? What’s so important?” he asked.

“I didn’t say it was important, did I?” Wilfred answered awkwardly.

“You didn’t need to.”

“I’m bored. I want to talk. The newts around here aren’t very chatty.”

“Sure,” Jeremiah replied with a snort. “Look, this all very fascinating, you being a talking newt and all, but I have to be up at sunrise to start my chores. So if you’ve got nothing further to say, I’m going back to bed.”

“No! Wait! I’m sorry.” Wilfred’s skin went a shade paler and his body grew clammy in Jeremiah’s cupped palm. “I’m ... I’m ... rather embarrassed. I need to ask you a favour.”

“A favour? Jeremiah looked down at the small creature in surprise. “What sort of favour could you possibly wish to ask me?”

“Well... as it happens, I’m stuck rather a long way from home and I can’t get back. That is, I could, I know the way of course, but it would take months. I’m not exactly built for cross-country hikes.”

Jeremiah looked out across the fields to the six-foot wall that separated him from the outer world. “If you didn’t swim, or walk, how did you get here?”

“I wasn’t paying much attention and a kingfisher got me. Carried me all the way over here,” Wilfred explained. “I suppose you could say I flew.”

“A kingfisher?” asked Jeremiah suspiciously. Why didn’t he just eat you?”  
Something in Wilfred’s story didn’t ring true.

The newt eyed Jeremiah, a glimmer of respect emerging. "You do ask a lot of questions for a young boy."

Jeremiah grinned. "All the time. Until they are answered."

Wilfred sighed and closed his eyes. His tail began to flick spasmodically.

"I...um... Let's just say I made it difficult for him to let go enough to eat me. I don't really want to talk about it. I don't want to even think about it. It's something I'd really like to forget..."

Jeremiah wasn't an unkind boy, and he hated to see any creature in distress. Besides which, he was becoming more intrigued by the minute.

"All right, all right," he said. "So what do you need me for?"

"Could you take me home? It's not far for a manchild to walk."

"Take you home? Outside Omondei? Why me?"

"To be honest, I've been trying to get someone's attention for a week. Anyone's attention at all. And you're the first person to talk back. I don't know what's wrong with the people here. It's like they're locked inside their own heads."

"So I'm your last resort?" Jeremiah demanded, deeply offended.

"Well, you've managed to keep an open mind, even here. And you look like a fine strapping lad, with strong sturdy legs. I feel like the luckiest newt alive that you would be the one to hear me. It must be fate!" Wilfred looked at Jeremiah, his large hooded eyes blinking furiously. "Please! I'll never see my wife and little efts again if you don't."

"I'll have to ask my father."

"And what do you think your father will say when you ask him if you can escort a talking newt home?"

"I can't just leave him here. He can't tend the farm all on his own."

"You'd be surprised what your father can do on his own."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that he's a grown up. They can take care of themselves."

Jeremiah considered his options. It didn't seem like a particularly dangerous mission. All he had to do was walk a way and carry a newt. It probably wouldn't even be that far, using human legs instead of newt ones. As adventures went, this one wasn't likely to be particularly heroic. Still, he'd be out of the village. He'd be seeing new things. It had to be less boring than pigs.

"OK, I'll do it. Let's go."

"Just like that?" Wilfred glanced up at the sky. "It's almost dawn."

"So?"

"So, don't you think people might come chasing after you? We need to get a head start on them. And you'll need food. And water. We can start out tomorrow night, after you've had time to prepare, once your father's gone to bed."

Jeremiah had to admit it made sense. He couldn't tell his father where he was going, because he was sure to refuse his permission, and he'd be sure to come looking when he noticed that Jeremiah was gone. The only option was to sneak off in the middle of the night. The two agreed to meet back at the front door the next evening. Jeremiah bent to the ground and Wilfred scuttled off his hand.

"Oh! You might want to wash your hands," Wilfred said sheepishly.

"Why?" Jeremiah asked, inspecting his palms for signs of dirt.

"My skin is ... well ... it's a little poisonous," the newt replied.



“Poisonous? You could have told me earlier!”

“It won't kill you. Just give you a bit of a stomach-ache. Besides which, it's never too early to establish good habits. And cleanliness is one of them. But if you don't want to wash them, just remember not to lick them,” Wilfred said helpfully. Jeremiah looked at him and shook his head to clear it. First a talking newt, and now hygiene lessons in the middle of the night. He made his way over to the bucket and washed his hands thoroughly.

“Now don't forget,” Wilfred said, “tomorrow night, as soon as your father is safely asleep.”

“Tomorrow,” said Jeremiah on a huge yawn, stumbling slightly as he made his way back to bed.