
SONGFLIGHT

THE DRAGON SINGER CHRONICLES
BOOK I

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SONGWEAVER
MEDIA



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*For the voiceless
and those who would hear them.*

ARRAN

F'renn's
Mnt

KADDID

DARRID

Rorenth's
Mnt

AZROD

Serpent's
Fangs

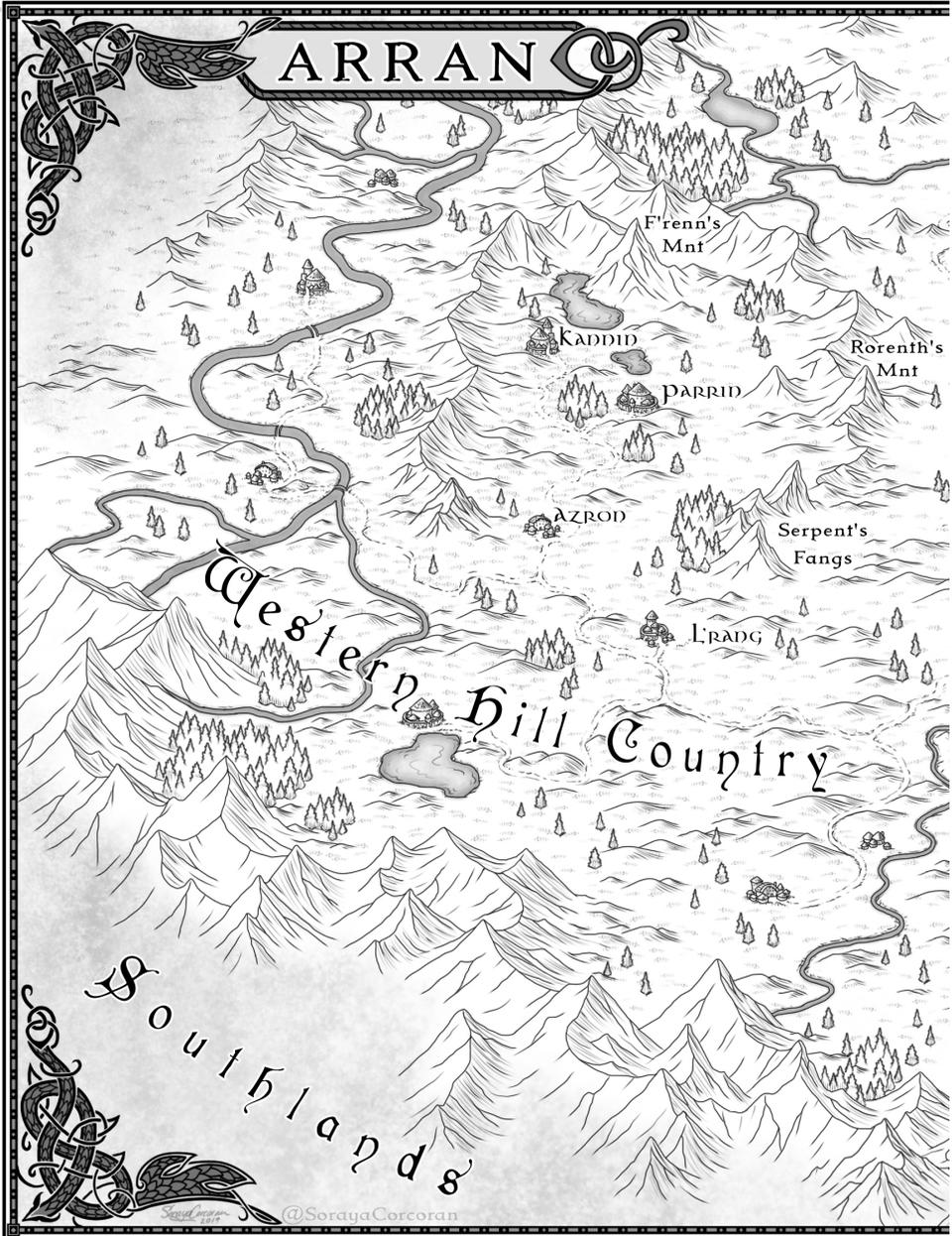
LRANG

Western
Hill Country

Southlands

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PRONUNCIATIONS & DEFINITIONS

(Prologue through Chapter 4)

A'dem (ah-DEHM) — *the planet*

Alisa (ah-LEE-suh) — *slayer, wayfarer, daughter of Karn & Hanah*

Anam (AH-nahm) — *soul*

Arran (eh-RAN) — *the continent on which this tale takes place*

Azron (AZ-ron) — *Alisa's home village*

Branni (BRAH-nee) — *the Eldra of warriors and slayers*

D'tala (d-TAH-luh) — *the first Eldra of wind and spirit*

D'tohm (d-TOHM) — *the Eldra of wind and spirit, new name of Tohmra*

Elani (eh-LAH-nee) — *slayer, wayfarer, Alisa's aunt, wife of L'non, mother of Levan & Taer*

Eldra (EL-druh) — *an angelic being given stewardship over specific aspects of A'dem; plural form: Eldír (EL-deer)*

Farren (FEHR-en) — *songweaver, wayfarer with Karn's clan*

Hanah (HAH-nuh) — *weaver, slayer by marriage, wife of Karn, mother of Alisa*

Iompróir Anam (YOHM-proh-ihr AH-nahm)—*soul-bearer*

Kallar (ka-LAR)—*slayer, wayfarer, apprentice of Karn*

Karn (kahrn) — *slayer, wayfarer, chief, husband of Hanah, father of Alisa*

L'non (luh-NON) — *slayer, wayfarer, brother of Karn, husband of Elani, father of Levan & Taer*

Levan (LE-vehn) — *slayer, wayfarer, trainee, son of L'non & Elani, twin brother of Taer*

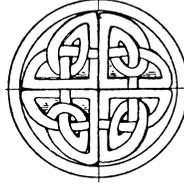
Prilunes (PRI-loons) — *mountains dividing Arran's North and Southlands*

Taer (tayr) — *slayer, wayfarer, trainee, son of L'non & Elani, twin brother of Levan*

Toronn (TOH-rahnn) — *slayer, chief, village-bound to Azron*

Trísse (trees) — *slayer, wayfarer, best friend of Alisa*

PROLOGUE



A rattling inhalation was all the warning Karn received before fire rained from the skies. He raised his bronze shield with a warning to his men, his shout swiftly drowned out by the rushing of flames. His arm ached as he pressed against the blaze. Sweat poured from his body, sticking ash and dirt to his tanned features and plastering his fiery red warrior's braids to his neck.

His men were tired. *He* was tired. After nearly six hours hiking and climbing this mountain, they now faced hours of battle ahead. But one glance into any of his warriors' eyes would confirm their resolve. They fought for their families and for the physical and spiritual good of the country of Arran. They would return victorious, or not at all.

Against the evil of the dragons, there was no other option.

As soon as the flames ceased, Karn lowered his shield and watched his attacker fly high into the sky. He leaned on the shaft of his spear as he took quick stock of his slayers—thirty-one able men hiking the rocky incline, each cloaked in armor of dragon scales and bronze. Each wore war-paint in the color and symbol of his station, though status meant nothing in the heat of battle. All that mattered was who bore the responsibility of bringing them home, and the red across Karn's own brow declared it his.

Five scaly beasts flew over them, each taller than a man at its withers—two of them twice that. Their flames could incinerate a man in seconds; a slap of a tail could break him; each tooth, talon, and spine could tear him to pieces; yet his slayers pressed forward.

Karn locked his eyes on the largest of the beasts, its scales the dull green of cloud-shaded hills. He reached out with his mind and prodded

against the dragon's psychic defenses.

Hard as the mountain. This one would have to be killed by spear or sword.

At the rush of flight behind him, Karn raised his shield and ducked low. The flames lasted only a moment, yet his heart pounded into his throat. An overwhelming terror sank deep into his stomach and sent his thoughts into a jumble.

That was too close!

This mission would be his last.

He would never see his wife and daughter again.

The dragons would destroy the village they were protecting.

Burn his wayfarers' tents to the ground!

Take—

Karn shook his head hard, gritting his teeth against the fear forced upon him. He focused on rebuilding his telepathic shield. He had let it down while prodding the green dragon, and this second dragon had taken advantage of it, sending a cloud of terror over him. The fear lifted as his psychic energies sealed over his mind.

This shield was the only reason he and his men had a fighting chance on this dragon-infested mountain. Without it, the beasts would either drive him mad with forced emotions or take his mind in full possession. Normals couldn't do this job, nor could the women left behind at camp. Though slayer women, too, held a psychic gift, they were merely empaths. They could sense and project emotions, but were unable to focus their powers into blasts or shields. Those without such protection could only last so long in a battle against dragons.

Karn glared after his empathic attacker as he rose back to his feet, a new hatred coursing through his veins. The dragon would pay for this violation of his mind. It would suffer for all the times its kind had infiltrated his daughter's mind. She couldn't stop it, couldn't protect herself, couldn't help but feel the emotions of even the weakest of dragons. He would snuff out every dragon in the world to make sure their evil couldn't affect her anymore.

His rage became a psychic spear—emotion focused to a point, then launched from his mind to the dragon's. The beast screamed as Karn's mind tore past its defenses, and its flight faltered, dipping closer to his

men. The slayers had been waiting for such an opening, and three of them launched their spears into the air, one finding a lethal hold in the dragon's soft underbelly.

The creature's brethren roared in outrage and dove at Karn's men. Another spear found its mark in a dragon's heart. Warriors dove to escape flames. Karn kept moving, his boots gripping the dirt and gravel. He changed his grip on the spear in his right hand as a dragon dove for him, thrusting up as the creature flew overhead and drawing a pained roar from its throat. Not a fatal wound, but it would slow the monster down.

Six dragons flew above them now, new beasts replacing the slain. They were drawing the monsters from their caves. If Toronn's information was correct, this dragon clan had twenty-some adults. His slayers would have to take them down quickly before the dragons overwhelmed them.

"Group up!"

His men followed the command, gathering together in predetermined groups of three and four. A seventeen-year-old slayer on only his third battlefield ran to Karn, carrying a long, broad shield. Of Karn's group of three, this young man was the weakest psychic and so would defend his elders as they attempted to choke dragons out of the sky.

Karn opened his mind once more and prodded another dragon, a black one. Its defense was weaker than the last, giving way under Karn's telepathy. Karn pointed out the dragon to L'non—his brother and third partner—and they attacked, focusing their powers into bolts of energy that speared through the dragon's psychic shield.

The creature roared in pain as the slayers' combined energies spread over its mind like oil. They squeezed the dragon's mind, cutting it off from its body and making it impossible for the dragon to control itself. It fell, its mind squirming against their hold as it neared the mountainside.

"Down!"

Karn and L'non dropped low at the call of their young defender, making it under the shield just as flames splashed over it, spewed from the maw of another dragon.

Karn cursed as the fire and shield cut off his sightline to the black dragon, ending his psychic hold. As the flames ended, a black shape climbed back into the sky, confirming their target had regained control

before crashing to the rocks. They'd have to try again.

A scream of agony came from down the mountain, sending a bolt of lightning to Karn's heart. The cry lasted only a moment—one of his slayers claimed by dragon-fire.

Another cry drew Karn's eyes just in time to see one of his men hit the ground hard, his shield slapped by a red dragon's tail. The dragon trumpeted its victory. Karn gritted his teeth and pointed to it.

"Again, L'non!"

Together, he and his brother wrestled with the dragon's mind until they brought it crashing to the ground. But now there were eight dragons in the sky, all of them staying far out of reach of their spears except to dive-bomb the men. There were too many to take psychically, and they just kept coming.

A shout of rage echoed from further up the mountain, ripping from the mouth of Karn's apprentice, Kallar. His blue eyes shown in bright contrast to his black hair, and as soon as those eyes locked with Karn's, a firm prodding pressed against Karn's mental shield.

Kallar had always been more at-ease than other slayers when it came to using telepathy to communicate. The rest of humankind, slayer and normal alike, balked at such an invasion of privacy; but Kallar knew that, and he wouldn't address his chief in this way unless it was urgent. Karn relaxed his shield.

"We need to take the cave, Karn. Cover us."

Kallar pulled away before Karn could respond, shouted something to the men nearby, and bolted up the mountain. Six slayers followed in his wake, holding their shields over their heads and charging after him without hesitation.

It was foolishly brave—the dragons would see their direction and know their intent. But if they didn't stop the flow of dragons into the sky, they might not make it home.

A sapphire dragon dove at Kallar's troop, its eyes brightening as the fire within it brewed. Karn speared it telepathically and L'non followed suit, choking its mind just in time to stop the flames. The fall was too short for the dragon to die on impact, but another group of his men were nearby. They would end the brute.

"Forward!" Karn barked as he ran. The closer they got to Kallar, the

better they would be able to defend him and his men.

“Left!”

Karn raised his shield and ducked as intense heat surrounded him. The fire lasted only a moment before it was cut off by a screech of pain and an earth-rattling thud. Karn stood to see the dull-green dragon on its side, L’non’s spear protruding from its underbelly.

The dragon shook its head hard and stood with a moaning growl. Not a fatal wound. Karn raised his own spear and ran at the beast. The dragon coughed smoke, apparently out of firepower, then struck with teeth.

Karn dodged, then hit the dragon in the side of the head with his shield. The dragon curled its neck back like a serpent and struck again. Karn dove to the ground and pushed his spear up, aiming for the dragon’s eye and just missing it.

A roar of pain ripped from the creature’s throat and it stumbled. At its belly were Karn’s partners, the young man’s sword in the dragon’s soft flesh. L’non jerked his spear out of the dragon and jammed it into the beast’s heart, silencing it forever.

Beyond them, a cheer rose from the slayers. Karn pushed off the ground and rounded the dead dragon to see Kallar and his men at the cave entrance. The men stood side-by-side, their shields locked against each other like interlocking scales, and their heads low, ducking under a flash of fire. As soon as the flames ended, Kallar charged with a battle cry, his men echoing him as they followed.

Pride swelled in Karn’s heart. Cave-storming was the most dangerous part of dragon-slaying, a job typically reserved for the more experienced slayers—those used to the danger, who could keep a cool head under pressure.

Kallar was anything but cool-headed, but what he lacked in calm he made up for in passion. He had soaked up Karn’s teachings ever since his first day of apprenticeship, learning all he could about a dragon’s strengths and weaknesses, studying battle-tactics, practicing telepathic shields and attacks. Even when Kallar’s first cave-storming ended in disaster, leaving him with a burn scar that covered his left arm, he hadn’t slowed in his training.

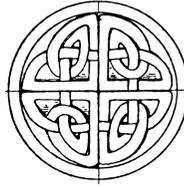
He would make a fine chief one day, a righter of wrongs and

protector of Karn's daughter. If anyone could save her from the evil of the dragons, it was him.

A pained trumpet brought Karn out of his thoughts and back to the battle. There were only five dragons left in the sky, and so far no more had made it past Kallar and his men. Karn pointed to the dragon highest in the sky and combined his attack with L'non, choking it down to its death against the mountainside.

Victory was theirs.

DEADLY CEREMONY



Alisa lifted her eyes toward the mournful trumpeting. It settled in her heart like mountain stone, weighing down each step around the ceremony circle with its harsh reality. She forced a pleasant smile to her face, as she had for every ceremony since she was thirteen and her problem first manifested.

Tonight, she would suffer alongside the evil her clan fought, and she would do so in silence.

She ran her fingers over the ends of her frizzy mahogany curls, her fingers stopping at the sapphire dragon-scale necklace from her father. She fingered the scale's tiny ridges, her heart trembling. A wistful hope cast her eyes out over the verdant grasses. Just beyond that hill lay camp—empty, quiet, and devoid of anyone's emotions except her own. If only she could hide there in her family's tent for the evening. Surely after seventeen years she could miss one ceremony.

But no—tonight would honor her clan of wayfaring slayers, especially her father. His former chief and trainers dwelt in this village, and now that Karn was a chief in his own right, his clan and family must prove him worthy of his position.

Honor and duty came before comfort. The pleasant smile stayed.

Alisa glanced out over the crowd gathered in the circle. Most were slayers, all either of her father's clan or bound to protect this single village of Azron. Many of the wayfarers wore their dragon-scale armor, freshly cleaned of the blood and grime of battle. They gleamed in the sunlight in jewel-tones dulled with use. Some of the village men wore similar garb, but most wore the gold-and-green colors of Azron on kilts and sashes over their clean white shirts.

It would be hard for Kallar to hold back his derision tonight. *'No true dragon-slayer would own something so clean,'* or some nonsense like that.

The women, wayfaring and village-bound alike, wore their best dresses, some with tight corsets over their tops, others allowing the light fabric to flow more freely in the wind. Alisa herself had chosen a deep green dress with a gold-and-white sash over her sword-belt. She always chose the dress for ceremonies. The shade matched the astral color of peace and calm—hopefully it would stir some of the same feelings inside of her.

Only a few normals walked among the slayers today. The village chief made his rounds, clasping the arms of each of the wayfaring warriors, his wizened face creased with laugh lines. Songweaver Farren was somewhere in the throng, or perhaps was taking a moment of quiet before singing in honor of Garrett, a slayer who had fallen this last battle. Three or four holders walked among them, carrying trays of food and jugs of mead with their exaggerated smiles.

Holders were the darlings of every village, held in high esteem and honor for their generosity and hospitality. They manned the Hold, a community hall as well as a place for travelers to spend a night or two before heading on their way.

Holders also tended to be chatty and nosy, drawing people into long conversations. Alisa did her best to avoid them.

Everyone, slayer and normal alike, laughed and chatted like they didn't have a care in the world. For them, it was true. The dragon clan festering in the nearby mountain was ended at the wayfarers' hands—all but two hatchlings saved for tonight's festivities—and now Azron could rest easy. Tomorrow the village-bound could still rest easy, but the wayfarers would be on their way to the next mountain, always moving, never stopping until death took them or the war ended.

Another cry from the hatchlings brought her back to the present, and she shivered under the weight of her secrets. Each ceremony held the potential for their discovery, but to stay away would also raise questions. She had become quite good at hiding her shame these last few years; good enough that her parents didn't know just how bad it had become. As long as she was able, she would keep that secret. Her father had enough to worry about without adding her mounting problems to the list. She could

handle it.

Would handle it.

Alisa loosened the reins on her empathy, allowing her powers to flow out from her and catch some of the positive emotions wafting from the clan. She rejected excitement's pounding and joy's tickling flight for the steady flow of relief. That emotion was one she could match to her own, one that could overcome the dread settling in her heart. Her father had returned safely, the clan was whole again, and this beautiful village where she had grown up was at peace.

This was reality, the deepest truth she had to cling to in the face of the coming onslaught. But it would only last for so long.

"Alisa?"

She twisted to meet a silvery-blue gaze that nearly matched her own. Her mother Hanah's twisting laurel of auburn braids caught the evening sunlight, its gentle waves settling over the shoulders of a finely-embroidered blue dress. A petite woman, only an inch taller than Alisa, but one others noticed when she stood before a crowd. She had an air of authority about her that showed through even in her softest moments—a necessary quality for the lady of a wayfaring clan.

Will I ever have even that?

"You look lost, love," she said, worry creasing her brow. "Will you be all right tonight?"

Alisa nodded once as she found an acceptable lie. "I was j—just thinking about you and P-P-P-Papá—"

She fought not to wince at her stammer. *'Confidence covers weakness,'* her father had told her countless times. But confidence and the mask she now wore were two completely different things. She knew what she was—the peoples' reactions told her every day. The eyes of pity, the impatient toe-tapping, the interruptions and guessing of the words she couldn't spit out. She was an annoyance in conversation and a hindrance on the battlefield.

Her mother gave a prodding nod, and Alisa breathed low and deep, allowing her throat muscles to loosen.

"—about how well you lead the c-c-clan. That's all."

Hanah gave a knowing half-smile. "Don't worry. Maker-willing, it won't be your turn for a long time, and you won't be alone."

Alísa followed Hanah's eyes to the chief's table, where Kallar and the village-bound slayers' chief, Toronn, spoke together. As always, Kallar stood tall, confident in his position as Karn's apprentice and the future chief of the wayfaring clan.

His raven-black hair flowed free of his warrior's braids, reaching to his shoulder on one side and shaved within an inch of his scalp on the other. His weathered blue scale armor accentuated steely blue eyes that gave her chills when he stared at her—not of fear or desire, but uncertainty. He unsettled her, trying to woo her with charm one moment, then turning into something cold and distant the next.

He and Alísa weren't betrothed, but the official declaration wasn't needed. Marriage was expected of them, and though she didn't love Kallar, she had mostly come to grips with that reality. He could command armies, slay dragons, and make the world a safer place. She couldn't even say her father's name without stammering or sit through a dragon-killing without choking back sobs. Many warriors had given their lives in this war—surely she could give her love-life.

Her mother took her hand and led her to the table next to Toronn's. They slid into their seats of honor, and Alísa inhaled the warm, savory smells of the roasted beef and sliced potatoes. Her stomach ached with both hunger and anxiety, twisting her up inside.

Soon. Soon they would eat, the younger teens would train against the hatchlings, and it would be over.

A burst of laughter came from her right, and she glanced at Chief Toronn and Kallar. The great chief's auburn beard had gained some gray in the two years since Alísa last saw him, but he seemed as sharp and strong as ever.

Toronn caught Alísa staring at him, and she looked away quickly. His cold black eyes made her feel weak and small—a mere sparrow in the presence of a war-hawk. She couldn't remember a time he had ever smiled at her. She was a disappointment to him—the only child of his apprentice, a stammerer, and a slayer who balked at killing hatchlings.

She fingered her necklace. *At least he doesn't know why I hate it. If he did, I could be ostracized, or worse.* Toronn was known and respected enough in the area to have that kind of influence, despite her position as a chief's daughter.

A hand found her shoulder, and she twisted to see her father's soft brown eyes smiling down at her. His copper curls were a couple shades brighter than hers, the top pulled back and bound away from his face. His hair and beard clashed beautifully with the dulled rubies of his dragon-scale armor, his deep brown fur-lined cloak acting as a barrier between the two warring colors.

Her heart swelled. Shame never clouded her father's eyes when he looked at her. In the light of his love, what did it matter what Toronn thought?

He bent low and whispered. "I know you don't like being here. Thank you for facing it."

He kissed her forehead and his beard tickled her nose.

"I love you, my Lísá."

She smiled back at him, trying to convey the strength she wanted so desperately to have. Everything she faced tonight would be for him, just as he faced the monsters for her. It was the least she could do.

Karn took his place next to Toronn, and Kallar slid into his seat beside Alísá. He took her hand and lifted it to the tabletop, holding it there as if to claim her in the eyes of all. He leaned in and whispered.

"Anyone give you trouble while I was away?"

She shook her head without meeting his gaze. He didn't mean trouble like looking down their nose at her or talking behind her back. He meant the young men of the village—did anyone make moves on her? He should know by now that wasn't going to happen.

Songweaver Farren, a tall, older man with deep inner strength, strode into the center of the ceremony circle. He had left Azron alongside Alísá's family nearly nine years ago. He was always kind, soft-spoken, and generous with his time, especially with young people who loved music, and his songweaving had inspired her own.

Farren raised his arms above his graying head, and Alísá stood with everyone else, village-bound and wayfarer alike. He lifted his baritone voice in prayer to the Maker—an honoring of the fallen and comfort to the living:

Why must the good die before their time,
And flames devour their prey?
When will our mourning be made right,
And smoke break for the day?

But in this world of suffering
The Maker holds us all.
His blessings follow those who stand,
Though some to home He calls.

Alisa joined quietly, hiding her voice under the others' as the people repeated the last lines.

His blessings follow those who stand,
Though some to home He calls.

All fell silent in a final honoring of those killed by the dragons, and she noted that Kallar had once again stayed silent. He had never forgiven the Maker for the loss of his mother at the flames of the dragons. He had only been a boy, nine or ten, but he carried the scars as he did the one covering his left arm—a mixture of pride and hatred.

Still, none of that should keep him from blessing Garrett's sacrifice.

She sighed softly. How many more of these songs would she have to hear in her lifetime? While the *anam*—the soul—lived on forever in the Maker's halls, why should His people be killed by the soulless? Why did the Maker allow dragons to live on when they obeyed the bidding of the Nameless, those Eldír who had turned away from Him and now sought to destroy His humans?

His *iompróir anam*. His soul-bearers.

Chief Toronn broke the silence with his deep, booming voice. "Now we must honor these brave men by living the lives they died to grant us. Please, be seated, enjoy your food, and live!"

Kallar released her hand, and Alisa sat slowly, staring at the food in front of her. She had to eat something, and it would be easier now, before the dragon-training began. She chewed a bite of the savory beef slowly, praying she wouldn't lose it later.

“Karn, my friend.” Toronn leaned over to her father, a wineskin in hand. “Pour out your water and try some of this—the finest mead this side of the Prilunes!”

Her father shook his head. “One never knows when a dragon attack will come. Best to be unhindered, though I thank you for your offer.”

Toronn looked to Hanah. “I see you’ve failed to loosen him up, dear lady. Do try harder.”

Hanah looped her arm through her husband’s with a smile. “I wouldn’t change him for anything.”

Toronn huffed, shaking his head. “*Couldn’t* change him is more likely.” He looked to Kallar next. “I don’t suppose he’s gotten to you too?”

Kallar stole a glance at Alisa. “I’m afraid it makes my lady uncomfortable—but thank you.”

Alisa looked down as Toronn raised an eyebrow at her, her cheeks warming under his scrutiny. Even when Kallar attempted to be considerate, he ended up making things worse.

Shadows against the setting sun drew Alisa’s eyes from her half-finished supper. Seven silhouettes approached the circle—a man and four boys striding purposefully, dragging two hatchlings in their midst. Conversation faded to silence as the trainees approached. The boys, each between twelve and sixteen years, worked together to hold the hatchlings in a light mind-choke, keeping them weak, but still allowing movement.

Alisa’s heart clenched. If only one of the boys would draw their sword now and end the hatchlings’ suffering quickly. End *her* suffering before it began.

A young child called out one of the trainee’s names in recognition, breaking the boy’s concentration. The larger of the two dragons jolted up and trumpeted, pulling against the ropes around its neck. Alisa winced as its emotions broke through the trainees’ psychic hold.

Fear and anger. A small taste of what was to come.

The trainer at the back of the group placed a hand to his temple and sealed the gap in the mind-choke. The hatchling slumped again as it lost control, and the young slayers forced it to march into the circle once more.

Alisa closed her eyes and breathed, their emotions contained once more by the mind-choke. *That was fine. I can do this.*

Her heart and stomach ignored her self-talk. The next wave would

be worse.

She opened her eyes again, staring at the sagging creatures as they entered the circle. Though evil, they were fascinating—caught somewhere between animal and *iompróir anam*. The race had given up their souls to the Nameless centuries ago in exchange for greater psychic power. The few slayers she knew who had heard a dragon's voice told of demonic jumbles of words and images that threatened to steal a person's sanity.

Would a young dragon's be the same? What might it say?

She shook her head hard. *No. Don't go there. It's thoughts like this that add to your empathy.*

The dragons' gem-like scales shimmered in the sunlight, one like the sapphire ripples of a lake, the other like gleaming bronze shields. The only spots their natural armor didn't cover were their muzzles and underbellies, which displayed tough skin a shade lighter than their scales.

They were beautiful creatures in their own way, though Alisa could never admit that thought to her clansmen.

She shuddered at the razor-sharp talons curving on the end of each toe, the pointed spines protruding along their necks and backs, the horns growing just above their ears, the sharp teeth peeking out from their lips.

Beautiful, but fearsome.

In sharp contrast to the armor, the wings were large, graceful, and smooth but for the slashes that kept the hatchlings from escaping.

What I wouldn't give to have the freedom of flight, to become the wind and leave fear and doubt anchored to the ground.

The larger of the two, a blue hatchling about three-and-a-half feet at the withers, was built lean and strong like one of the clan's horses. The bronze hatchling was stockier than the blue—it would have grown to be a muscular brute, perhaps ten or eleven feet at the withers.

Both were far too young to breathe fire or take someone's mind.

Far too young to die like this.

Every muscle in Alisa's body tensed as the boys and hatchlings faced each other in the center of the circle. Kallar leaned forward at her elbow, his eyes fixed on the spectacle. He enjoyed the sport of it all, something she would never understand.

The young slayers drew their swords, while their enemies could only

slouch low to the ground. In a moment, all of the boys would end the mind-choke and allow the dragons to move freely. The trainer would only intervene if the hatchlings threatened the onlookers.

Once the dragons' minds were freed, the suffering would begin.

FEAR!

Sweat covered Alisa's palms, and her heartbeat sped as terror gripped her, fear overtaking all other emotions. It was worse than the last ceremony; it had been a year since she had to fight emotions from two dragons. She would have to work much harder now to keep people from noticing.

She focused on the grooves in the stone table, grounding herself. *This isn't really happening. You're fine. This is all in your head. Keep it together.*

RAGE!

She clenched her teeth and fisted her skirt in clammy palms, fighting to suppress the fear and rage hitting her in alternating waves. Her mother placed a hand over hers and squeezed, trying to convey some comfort, but it couldn't help her fight the barrage.

She grunted as she pressed her empathy against the feelings, trying to crowd them out with her own.

It's been a while since I've felt rage at a hatchling-slaughter!

She shook her head. *No. Ceremony. Don't give in to the anger.*

The blue hatchling flared its wings at the boys and hissed, shuffling in front of the smaller bronze hatchling. Protecting it.

Nobility in the face of death.

Honor. In an animal.

The blue's stare lifted from the trainees until its gaze met Alisa's. Its deep brown eyes communicated an emotion nearly drowned by the flood of fear and rage—sorrow.

Tears welled behind Alisa's eyes. There was nothing she could do.

The blue broke eye-contact, fixated back on the boys, and charged, teeth bared and tail swinging. The oldest of the trainees raised his sword to strike.

PAIN!

Alisa's stomach churned as the sword glanced off scales and cut deep into a wing. She bit the inside of her lips and shut her eyes tightly, fighting back a whimper.

Keep it together. Make Papá proud. He doesn't have to know you feel their pain now too. No one can know.

Each cry barraged her with more pain and rage and fear. She hid her moans under the people's cheers. Why didn't anyone else feel it?

Because no one else is broken like I am. Defective. Weak.

A draconic cry crashed through her like it might crush her very soul. She whimpered, swallowing a scream. Two hatchlings were too much.

This isn't your pain. This isn't your pain! Eldra Branni, help me!

But no help came from the Eldra, no extra measure of strength, no passing of the pain. Alisa slapped a hand to her mouth just before a cry broke through her defenses—a trainee had just sliced through one of the hatchling's limbs.

She couldn't take it, not from two of them. She had to get away before she disgraced herself and her father.

Alisa stood on wobbly legs and staggered from the table. Eyes followed her retreat and shame mixed with her churning emotions. They couldn't know the torment she felt—they would probably think she fled because she couldn't stomach the violence. Either way, she had shown her weakness to her former village. To Toronn.

A hand took hers. "Sweetheart?"

Tears welled, and Alisa gritted her teeth against the cry threatening to breach her lips. She leaned into her mother's strength, grateful that the person taking her hand wasn't another slayer. Skin-contact with another psychic would transfer a part of the feelings. Though her mind begged for relief, she would never wish this pain on anyone.

They walked together to the Hold, slipping behind its walls. Alisa leaned back against the cool stone surface. Emotion still wafted to her like mists, unfazed by the physical barrier, but the distance dulled the feelings enough to keep her from screaming.

But the pain still throbbed in her skull, and the shrieking hatchlings battered her heart.

"What's going on, Alisa? It's never been this bad before—talk to me."

Alisa shook her head, pressing her lips together. She slid down the wall until she reached the ground, breathing deeply and counting—in for three, out for five—trying to focus on something other than the pain.

Hanah sat next to her, wrapping an arm over her shoulders and

pulling her close. “It’s okay. It’ll be over soon.”

Alisa’s blood boiled. “It’s *not* okay—I’ve brought Papá shame!” She winced at the tone her words took, influenced by the rage of the hatchlings.

“No, he’s not ashamed of you. He’s worried—he has been since this all started. He would have come too, but I told him to stay.”

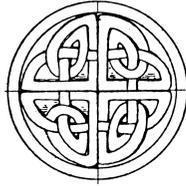
A death cry came from the circle, and Alisa cried out in tandem. She ground her teeth against the final spear to the heart before the feelings dimmed. One of the dragons’ emotions could no longer affect her.

One to go. It should make the rest easier.

Another slice proved her wrong, the new pain still white-hot inside her skull. She leaned into her mother’s shoulder, pressing for whatever tiny piece of comfort she could find. A final draconic scream pierced her heart, and she cried out as the death-pangs took her.

Her world faded to black.

SHAME



Alísa fixed her eyes on the ground and tried to bring the dirt and rocks into focus. Remnants of the hatchlings' terror and pain held her fast.

They're dead. They're dead, and a piece of me with them. How many more before I'm just an empty shell?

Her mother spoke to her, but the words were indiscernible, hiding behind the ringing in her ears and the pounding of her heart.

Is this what a mind-choke feels like? No control, no focus, no life?

Her mother wrapped a second arm around her. Alísa leaned into it as she tried to remember how to breathe normally, sucking air through open lips.

Hanah pulled back and placed a hand under Alísa's chin, lifting until their eyes met. Silvery-blue eyes of love grounded her.

I'm not dead. I didn't die with the hatchlings. I'm safe.

I'm safe.

Hanah whispered to her tenderly. "It wasn't just their emotions this time, was it? You were in pain."

Alísa stared at the ground. There was no way her mother would keep that information from her father. The secret was out.

"Do you want me to take you home?"

Alísa shook her head and whispered, a technique that eliminated her stammer. "Give me a minute."

She breathed shakily as Hanah tightened her embrace. She flexed her toes inside her boots, then wiggled her fingers, working through her whole body to see if she could control it. Once she could breathe without trembling, Alísa pulled away and met her mother's eyes.

It was time to be strong again. *Branni, help me.*

“I’m ready.”

Hanah searched her eyes a moment, then stood, offering her hand. Alisa took it and rose, shakily at first, but strengthening as they made their way back to the table. Toronn stood in the center of the circle, acknowledging the bravery of Karn and his warriors, but many eyes turned to her on their approach.

She straightened under their scrutiny. The people of Azron had known her to be squeamish at the killings since she was young—they couldn’t guess the truth. Her father had tried to comfort her before by telling her there had been other women who felt dragons like this, but Alisa had never heard of such women from anyone but him. Azron couldn’t know.

Karn turned and caught her eyes, his own filled with concern rather than judgement. Relief and embarrassment flooded her simultaneously, and she gave him a firm nod, trying to convey a confidence she didn’t have.

She slipped into her seat, avoiding Kallar’s questioning eyes. Now wasn’t the time. She tensed and relaxed every muscle in her body one after the other, starting at her toes and working up to her neck.

This is reality. My own body. My control over it.

Movement pulled Alisa’s attention as Songweaver Farren switched places with Toronn. The chief’s eyes settled on her as he approached, suspicion flowing from them.

‘Confidence covers weakness,’ her father would say. ‘Lift your eyes.’

She straightened and met the chief’s gaze. She could only hold there for a second, but it was enough for her. If her father didn’t look on her in shame, even in this moment, Toronn had no right.

Now if only her racing heart would believe that were true.

A respectful silence came over the circle as Farren raised his lute to his chest. This was the only part of ceremonies Alisa could enjoy—the songweaver’s tale. Something new to focus on—music to help heal her torment.

She closed her eyes as Farren strummed the tale’s introduction. The notes flew up and down the scale in her mind until the words painted pictures of a place far from her sorrows.

O'er a hundred years ago, a slayer loved a maid.
Garin vowed to win her heart, their love ne'er to fade.
Bria's heart was fierce and strong—none would ever tame her.
Sword and shield firm in hand, in her own right a slayer.

But dragons are a crafty beast and hearts make easy prey.
So, in the midst of battle fierce, they stole Bria away.
Garin's strength was nearly gone, but hope still filled his eyes.
And bolstered by courageous men, he sounded forth his cry:

By scaled wing, by tooth and claw
The dragons stole my maid away.
But they won't have her soul tonight;
I'll give my life to save her.

To the mountain, toward the caves, up rocky crag and slope.
Dragons charged them one by one, but none could end their hope.
Fire blasts from beastly jaws met with battle cries,
And as the day drew to an end, their song still pierced the night:

By scaled wing, by tooth and claw
The dragons stole our maid away.
But they won't have her soul tonight;
We'll give our lives to save her.

From the cave the maiden cried, and Garin ran to meet her.
Bria begged him for the life of the monstrous creature.
Garin saw right through the guise—the dragon gained her mind.
Our hero knew to save her soul the dragon had to die!

By scaled wing, by tooth and claw
The dragons stole my maid away.
But they won't have her soul tonight;
I'll give my life to save her.

I'll give my life to save her.
I'll give up all to save her!

Sword and shield to claw and scale, and slayer mind to beast,
Outside the cave, the slayers fought that Bria be released.
And Garin, strong of heart and mind, he tore the dragon out.
Monster dead and Bria free, he lifted up his shout:

By scaled wing, by tooth and claw
The dragons stole my maid away.
But they won't have her soul tonight;
I'll give up all to save her!

The final notes rang out into the evening air, and after a moment of reverent silence the audience applauded the songweaver.

Darkness now covered the ceremony circle, and a holder hurried to light the bonfire. With the end of the tale came a time of conversation and drinks that would eventually turn to dancing and go late into the night.

The rest of her table stood to mingle, but Alísa stayed to merely watch. After pushing through an overload of dragon emotions, wading into a pounding sea of excitement and dancing was the last thing she wanted to do. Only her mother gave her a questioning glance.

"I'm fine, Mamá," Alísa said, smiling through the remnants of pain.

A new female voice came from behind. "I've got her, Lady Hanah."

Alísa twisted to smile at Trísse, her close friend and only confidante in her secret of the dragons' pain. She stood tall and graceful in her deep blue dress overlaid with a sword-maiden's leather vest. Her glossy black braid and nearly-black eyes shone in the firelight.

Hanah gave Trísse a grateful smile, then followed after Karn. It was their last night in Azron and her mother had friends and family to attend to. Technically, Alísa did too, but she had apparently scared her mother so badly that she didn't even try to get Alísa to come.

Trísse sat backward on the bench, her sword slipping under the table while she leaned back against it. She arched an eyebrow and said nothing, leaving Alísa to speak first. Alísa contemplated not speaking at all, but the intensity of Trísse's gaze brought the words out.

“How bad was it?”

“Bad. Really bad.”

Alísa cringed. “B—Bad like, ‘Oh that p-p-poor girl, unable t-to stomach the violence’? Or bad like they could f—f—f—f—”

“—Figure it out?” Trísse finished, unafraid to step on Alísa’s toes. She was perhaps the only one who could do it without making Alísa want to slap her.

Trísse sighed. “I don’t know. Not all of them have the brainpower for it, and some of the others probably don’t care enough to think it through. But if your parents and Kallar and your uncle haven’t figured out you feel pain, I’d be highly surprised. And disappointed. I’d probably leave to find a clan with more intelligent leadership.”

Alísa swallowed, unable to give Trísse even a chuckle. She lifted a hand to her dragon-scale necklace, but Trísse stopped her.

“Come on. Staying here like there’s a problem will only make it more obvious. Let them see you smile and dance, then call it a night and let your mind heal.”

“Easy for you to say,” Alísa whispered, keeping her stammer at bay. “You aren’t crushed by the crowds, physically or empathically.”

Trísse smirked at the slight jab. She was an empath too, but her powers were far weaker than Alísa’s. She picked up the emotions of those closest to her, both in proximity and relationally, while Alísa picked up the entire crowd.

“At least you can slip between people.” Trísse helped Alísa to her feet, standing nearly a foot taller than her. “Making my way out of a crowd leaves me battle-scarred.”

“B—Better lead, then, else I leave you behind.”

Trísse stayed beside her the entire time, whether dancing to the holders’ music, crowd-watching, or anything in-between. When the women enquired after Alísa, she simply smiled and claimed an upset stomach—half-truth, but truth nonetheless. While some still eyed her suspiciously, none pressed the issue.

Perhaps an hour in, Alísa could barely focus on anything. Though free of the dragons’ pain, all the emotions of the crowd battered her mental defenses. They mixed and itched like the scents in the holders’ spice boxes. Excitement, fatigue, joy, sadness, suspicion—she couldn’t

hold them back anymore.

She was just about to tap Trisse on the shoulder and excuse herself, when Tern, Trisse's pursuer, asked Trisse to dance with him. Trisse's hard eyes softened as longing rose in her, but then she looked to Alisa.

"I'm sorry, Tern, but I'm rather worn—"

Alisa placed a hand on Trisse's arm. "I'm okay, T—T—T-T-Trisse. I'm ready to g—go back to the t-t-tent." She pointed to her temple. "T—too many p-p-people up here."

A grateful smile lit up Trisse's face, while Tern grabbed her hand quickly, as though afraid Alisa would change her mind. He led her away to the bonfire, and Alisa watched them go. What would it be like to be in love? Could such a thing ever grow between her and Kallar?

She shook the thoughts from her head and began weaving through the crowd. Laughter, exaggerated movements, and spilling drinks abounded. Alisa dodged through the people, occasionally catching an elbow or bumping shoulders.

And Trisse says I don't get bruises in a crowd.

A particularly enthusiastic woman flung her arms wide, sending splashes of mead flying. Alisa jumped back to avoid the drink, only to collide with a young man. She turned to give an apologetic smile before making her exit.

"Hey, I know you," he grinned, his eyes and teeth gleaming in the firelight. Though she couldn't place his name or family, a familiar mirth spilled from him—one that made her want to run.

"Still sensitive to dragon-killing, eh, Alisa? Delicate flower of a slayer."

She forced a smile through the sickening stench of alcohol on his breath.

"Excuse me."

She slipped away in the crowd, but he followed.

"I thought becoming a wayfarer would've toughened you up, but it seems the beasts have only gotten a tighter grip on you."

"You should have seen your face," another voice came. She turned to see two young men following the first, both familiar enough to place. These had set off tears more than once in her younger life.

She kept her eyes ahead of her and quickened her pace, crossing the

road and heading for the Hold. These man-children wouldn't dare slander her before their holders, assuming there were any still inside and not at the celebration.

"White as a sheet."

"Tell me, dragon-lover, how does it feel to know you're going to die? To have a spear thrust through your heart?"

She swallowed. Did they know, or were these just drunken ramblings?

"How can you expect to be chief if you have a dragon inside you, little Lísá?"

"I heard Karn's giving the job to Kallar so she won't have to."

Alísá clenched her fists. Their words were daggers, reopening wounds from long ago.

"Just as well—no one can hear her whispering."

"Or sit through her st-st-stammering!"

A chorus of laughter. Shame threatened to rise into her eyes, but she forced it down. She wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

"Poor Kallar, having to put up with your crying and sniveling in the face of the enemy."

"Not to mention all the clans."

"Did you see Karn's face when she limped away? He was so embarrassed."

Alísá halted, her arms trembling.

"Shut up." The words came more quietly than she wanted.

"I would be too if my daughter was a dragon-loving wench."

"I'd have stepped down long ago before she revealed my shame!"

Alísá whirled on them, rage rising in her chest. "How d—d—d-d-d—"
"Damn it! Why now?"

"There it is." The first boy laughed. "I was worried you'd grown out of it."

"Perhaps she's had too much to drink."

"Or a dragon's got her tongue!"

A burst of commotion, and the boys stumbled backward.

"Get away from her!"

Alísá started, relief and fear colliding within her. *Kallar!*

"Now!" He roared, grabbing one of the young men's arms and

yanking him back. He moved between her and them, rage pouring from him. “Any of you so much as look at her again, you’re dead.”

One of the aggressors scoffed. “You’ve had too much. Three slayers against one is no match.”

Another peeked at her around Kallar, a laugh in his eyes. “As I said, someone else fights her battles n—”

He stumbled against one of his companions, then slumped to the ground unconscious.

Alisa trembled, her eyes widening. *Did Kallar just mind-choke him?*

The others must have had the same thought, their lips curling into snarls.

“You dare use telepathy against your own?!”

The second fell.

The third didn’t waste any more time, swinging at Kallar’s face. Kallar caught the blow with a loud crack and punched him in the stomach, letting him fall to his knees with a moan.

Kallar’s voice evened, but fury still rippled from him. “Your friends will wake with the worst headaches of their lives. Next time, you won’t be so lucky.”

Alisa jumped as he pivoted to face her, his eyes still hard. She dropped her eyes to his boots.

“What were you doing?”

She tensed. “I’m t—t-tired. I was just going back to my tent.”

“By yourself?” He shook his head and grabbed her hand, walking her toward camp. Protectiveness poured through their skin-contact, soured by possessiveness. “I know this was your home once, but that doesn’t mean it’s safe. You should’ve asked me to take you back.”

She looked away. There hadn’t truly been any danger—she would have sensed if the man-children had intentions beyond mockery—but arguing that point with Kallar would not help matters. Best to stay quiet and let him take her home.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“C—camp isn’t far—”

“Not that. The pain.”

Her shoulders slumped and her voice came in a whisper. “I’ve been able to keep it together if there’s only one. I’d expected to handle two.”

“I could have shielded you. I know Karn didn’t want to at first—he said you’d grow stronger against the emotions given time—but if he had known about this, he would surely have changed his mind.” His tone turned bitter. “Instead, your precious secret’s been revealed to everyone.”

She looked away. “I hoped they’d just think I c—c-c-couldn’t stomach the violence.”

He stopped, looking at her with incredulity.

“You moaned and whimpered every time a blow landed! I heard them talking, and not just the mockers like these. They’re saying you have a dragon inside you.”

His words were a knife in her soul. Normals used the idiom to shame those who disrespected tradition or authority figures. Used by slayers, though, it spoke of people possessed by dragons or else used by the Nameless to work evil in the world.

She shivered with the chill of night. Why? Why did everything have to turn against her? First her voice, then her empathy, now her people? She wasn’t possessed! She hadn’t been turned to evil, hadn’t done anything except feel feelings she didn’t want.

“Empathy doesn’t mean I’m p—p-p-possessed.”

“No, but it means you can’t fight them.”

She gave a bitter laugh. “Isn’t that why you’re here? Why my f-father chose you to lead the c-clan?”

“Why *you* chose me,” he reminded with a point of a finger. “The clan needs a leader. You need a protector.”

Kallar’s eyes softened, and he threaded his fingers through her hair, stopping just behind her jaw. There was affection in his eyes, but entitlement clung to his every action.

“Why didn’t you tell me? I would have shielded you, my love.”

His presence fingered at her mind, his psychic touch gentle, yet unwelcome. She recoiled, pushing his hand away.

“I don’t n—need you anywhere near my mind.”

His eyes hardened again, indignation flaring. “You’d rather the dragons have access?”

“No.” She walked past him. *But I don’t want you slithering around in there either.*

“Then stop acting like it.” He grabbed her arm, pulling her to a stop.

“I know there was no love in this choice of yours, but I’ve done everything I can to win your affections. And you—”

He ended with a growl of exasperation, his frustration flowing into her mind. She didn’t push it back, instead using it to speak the words she normally wouldn’t.

“It’s not like you’ve m—made it any easier for me! Your arrogance, your entitlement to me—”

“Alisa…” he warned, his eyes flaring.

“—t-t-taking pleasure in the k-k-killings not because they m—make the world safer, but b-because it satiates your bloodlust!”

As soon as the words left her mouth, she knew she had gone too far. Kallar snarled at her, pulling her within inches of his face.

“You know *nothing* of my motivations. Nothing!” His fierce eyes bored into hers, anger now dripping from his every pore, sending her heart racing. “I’m trying to help you—to save you. But all I get in return is your loathing!”

“Let me go.”

“Well, I don’t care. They won’t have you, not on my watch!”

“Let me g—”

“I won’t let you end up like Bria!”

She blinked. “B—Bria?”

His rage melted into stunned realization, as though he had gone too far or said too much. He relaxed his grip, and she immediately pulled away, covering her arms with her hands. He stared at her, his chest heaving with deep breaths.

“You can make your way from here,” he whispered, nodding toward the hill separating them from camp. He turned around without another word and returned to the celebration.

She stared after him, her breaths short and shallow. In the absence of his anger, fear consumed her.

They know. Everyone knows.

She turned toward camp and broke into a sprint, running as though she could leave the thoughts behind in the village. Instead they chased her, nipping at her soul like wolves, crushing her heart like serpents.

Kallar’s connection between her and Bria suddenly made sense. Bria hadn’t chosen to be taken by the dragons, but still she was stolen. If the

strong, courageous warrior woman couldn't stand against the dragons, what hope did Alisa have of shaking this psychic hold?

What if it became worse? What if she ended up always being affected by dragons, even outside the ceremonies? What if her mind turned against her and she ran to them of her own accord?

If she couldn't trust herself, how could her clan trust her?

She jogged to a stop at the edge of camp and placed her hands on her knees. The campfire crackled in the midst of thirty dusty leather tents etched with swirling designs of protection from the Nameless and their servants. A lilting baritone voice flowed from near the flames into the night.

Farren. If it were anyone else, she would have snuck to her tent to be alone, but the kindly songweaver could give her what she truly needed—wisdom and a sympathetic ear.

Farren sat alone on a fallen log beside the fire, singing and staring into the flames. He barely noticed as she sat beside him and closed her eyes, breathing in the final chorus and willing her heart to settle.

His song was a favorite of hers—the beautiful tragedy of Eldra D'tala and how she had fallen in love with Tohmra, a mortal man. D'tala was the first steward of wind and soul, and she loved Tohmra's passion for the sea, where he used her winds and his ship to bring blessings to his people.

A dragon told D'tala of a potion she could create to give Tohmra immortality so they could be together, and she had done so with great joy. But the dragon was a follower of the Nameless, and the potion D'tala created instead transferred her immortality to Tohmra, sucking away her life.

Tohmra's first act as an immortal was to shepherd her soul back to the Maker's halls. There, the Maker changed his name and gave him D'tala's former stewardship. Now D'tohm gathers the Maker's fallen *iompróir anam* and escorts them to His halls, each time catching a glimpse of his love.

Now he waits for the day when the physical world falls and he can be with her once more.

Farren's last note faded into the night, and Alisa opened her eyes to his grandfatherly smile. He truly wasn't much older than her father, but he had the wisdom of the songweavers and all of her clan treated him with

the utmost respect.

“I’m sorry, Alisa, I didn’t know you were here too. Did I wake you?”

She shook her head, fingering her necklace. “I just got here. I needed to get away from p—people.”

“I understand.” His eyes softened. “I suspect you’ve been through more today than most know.”

No. Everyone knows, and that’s the problem. She looked down. “Why didn’t the Maker just fix things? Give D—D’tala back her immortality instead of letting her die?”

Farren’s voice quieted. “I don’t know, dear one.”

“He could have! He has the p-power! He can fix everything, s—so why d-d-d-doesn’t He?! D—d-did I do something wrong? Am I g—g—g—” Her throat closed up and she stared into the fire. *Am I going to do something wrong?*

“Sing it,” he whispered. “No one else is here.”

She swallowed. It wasn’t an unexpected request—she never stammered when she sang, and Farren always claimed it was one of the best ways to let out emotion. He was the only one she had ever felt comfortable enough to sing for, and her throat felt like it might explode from all the emotions stopped up inside.

Keeping her eyes on the flames, she breathed low and deep and allowed words to flow.

By Maker’s call I breathed my first,
my purpose borne in father’s hands.
By Maker’s plan I’m left in thirst,
my calling bound in verbal bands.

By Maker’s hand the slayers’ gift
pulsed anew inside my mind.
By Maker’s will I’m left adrift
as dragon feelings intertwined.

By Maker's breath I did my best,
but by His work I am betrayed.
By Maker's light I am oppressed;
why does He hate the one He made?

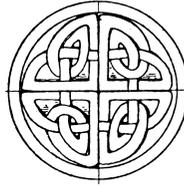
She allowed her final, heretical note to fade into the night until the only sound left was the crackling of flames. Tears slid down Farren's cheeks. He reacted more viscerally to music than she had ever seen a man react to anything. But then, warriors weren't exactly known for overflowing feelings—they left that to songweavers. She leaned against him and allowed her own tears to flow quietly.

"He doesn't hate you, dear one," he said softly. "Sometimes we must be stripped of all we know in order to become our true selves. It is His way."

She shook with a sob and Farren pulled her close, allowing her to cry on his shoulder. The Maker had stripped her today, exposed her for all to see. Farren said she would find her true self now, but if the Alisa now broken and sobbing on his shoulder was the true Alisa—if the woman with a dragon inside her was the true Alisa—she didn't want it.

If only all her people were like Farren, compassionate and non-judgmental, she would make it through. But they weren't, and tomorrow would bring her nightmares to life as she faced a clan that had seen her shame.

SECRETS



“Alisa, wake up.”

Alisa forced her eyes open to see her father. In the dim light filtering through the tent walls, she could see he was already dressed for the road, a dark green cloak over plain brown tunic and pants.

“You’ve overslept.”

She pushed the comfortably heavy furs off and sat up.

“I’m sorry. I slept so hard.” She grimaced as she stretched her arms and back, as stiff from yesterday’s sorrows as if she had carried all her family’s travel bags the day before.

Karn studied her, eyes full of concern. She looked away. It wouldn’t do any good to talk about what had happened. She wanted to help pack up camp and move out, like it was any other traveling day.

“I g—guess I should start p-packing.”

“No.” He placed a hand on her arm, his voice soft. “We need to talk first.”

She pressed her lips together and said nothing.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the pain? I would have found a way to let you stay home, while still saving face.”

Alisa shook her head. “If I stopped c—coming the clan would still know something was wrong. The p-p-pain was bearable until yesterday. I d-didn’t want to bring you shame.” A tear rolled down her cheek. “But I still did. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry!”

He pulled her to his chest and kissed the top of her head. “My brave, foolish girl—always thinking of others to her own detriment.”

“And yours,” she whispered, pressing into him. “Did I cause you trouble?”

“The clan won’t turn against me for this. Some will be angry at my secrecy, but all are loyal. Camaraderie is a powerful bond—things will go back to normal come the next battle.”

“And T—Toronn?”

His chest deflated with a quiet sigh. “If he wants to protect Azron from the next dragons to inhabit the mountain, he’ll come around. But when that day comes, you would do well to stay away.”

He pulled back and looked her in the eyes, his hands firm on her arms.

“The clan will have a difficult time trusting you now. You must be brave and show them you are still one of us. Show them a woman whose powers have betrayed her, but not bent her to evil.”

She swallowed. “But what if it gets worse?”

He smiled gently, belying the fear trickling from him.

“You don’t need to worry about that. Kallar and I will watch out for you and deal with things as they come.”

Right. Kallar.

She looked down, knowing his next answer, yet needing to hear it again. “Papá, are you sure you p-picked the right man? For the c—c-c-clan?”

Karn raised an eyebrow. “Did you two fight again yesterday?” When she didn’t look up, he continued. “About what?”

“D—does it matter?”

He sighed and spoke softly. “He’s not going to be chief for a long while, Lísá. He’s only twenty and has plenty of time to grow out of his idiot phase.” He cracked a smile, but she didn’t return it. “He will be a great man when he matures, and he’s already an exceptional tactical leader and the strongest slayer I’ve trained. If anyone can protect you from the dragons, he can. It’s bad enough you’re forced to share their feelings; I couldn’t bear it if they took you.”

Alísá jerked her head up. “T—took me? Why?”

He shook his head as if to clear it. “I was merely thinking of last night’s tale.”

Bria again. But she was a warrior, in constant contact with dragons, while I’ve rarely seen battle.

“Sweetheart, do you trust me?”

She nodded absentmindedly. *Why waste his energies on such an unrealistic fear?*

“Will you let me enter your mind?”

Alisa started. “What?”

“Now that I know the problem is still growing, I want to see if I can find a pattern besides the ceremonies themselves. If I can find the reason behind these connections, maybe I can help you fight it better. Will you let me look?”

He had never asked to see her memories before. Despite the ability, slayers rarely used their psychic powers on other people. Married men would connect to their wives for private communication sometimes, but even those connections were few and far-between. The mind was sacred, and telepathic connections opened private thoughts to perusal. Some even said if two minds connected too often, the stronger mind would shape the weaker after itself.

But she did trust him, and he wouldn't have asked if it weren't important.

“Okay.”

He smiled softly, raising a hand to her temple and pushing her hair back. His voice was soothing.

“I need you to relax. Calm your thoughts. This will be uncomfortable, but I'll be as gentle as I can.”

She nodded again, and he laid his other hand on her opposite temple.

“Look me in the eyes and relax.”

She did as he said. His mind pressed against hers, and she breathed slowly and deeply. Soon the pressure moved from outside her head to inside, as though her mind were stretching out past her head and into the chamber.

Visions of her past swirled around her as he searched, memories rushing to the forefront of her mind and leaving just as quickly. It was dizzying, but she focused on her breathing until a memory came into focus.

Three young men led a black hatchling to the middle of the ceremony circle. Alisa's five-year-old self gasped; she had never seen a dragon before.

Her father leaned over and reminded her of a story of dragons attacking a

village. He told her the dragons must be punished for what they did. Then Chief Toronn gave the order and one of the men drew his sword and swiftly severed the hatchling's neck.

Alisa whimpered and leaned against her mother as tears streamed from her eyes. It was just a little thing, like her. If something so small could deserve to die, what would happen if she did or said something Chief Toronn didn't like?

Her mother's arms pulled her close. "Karn, I don't think she was ready for this."

More visions flashed in front of her—all past encounters with dragons, all ending with a slaughtering. As the memories drew closer and closer to present day, her empathic powers in them grew.

FEAR!

RAGE!

PAIN!

Tears wet Alisa's cheeks as Karn pulled from her mind. A single tear ran down his own cheek, and he wrapped his arms around her. She trembled as his fear washed over her. He was a mighty warrior—he killed monsters three times his size for a living. How could anything make him feel this way?

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "This is my fault. I exposed you to the slayings while you were too young to understand, and you've carried the trauma and fear with you all these years. That's why the door to your mind was left open to them. I'm so sorry."

She squeezed him tightly. "It's okay, Papá. You didn't know. I'm okay. I'll be okay."

"Yes, you will be."

He pulled back to look her in the eyes, his own set with resolve, and despite the uncertainty and questions jostling inside of her, she had never felt more safe. Even if everyone else gave up on her, he wouldn't. And if the door to her mind was opened by his actions as he said, perhaps it could be closed by man as well.

There was hope.

"Now, get dressed." He gave a half-smile. "You must eat something—we have a long journey today."

She got up from her bed-mat as her father left the chamber. The morning's chill pressed her to choose a long brown dress and heavy green

cloak. She tied her hair behind her as she pushed through the canvas and entered the living space. Her father stood by the outside flap, waiting for her with a smile. She took his arm and they stepped into the sun together.

Weathered brown tents dappled the valley, and Alisa let out a soft sigh at the simple peace of camp. To the north lay new mountains to take back from the dragons—villages to set free from the beasts' reign of terror. In between lay rolling hills of green, the grasses tossing in the wind and beckoning the travelers.

Soon the clan would answer that call.

Breakfast had already been served, a combination of leftovers and fresh pork. Many of the clan sat in small groups, some chatting lively, while others looked like death warmed over. A few sat apart and shot glares at their loud clansmen as they nursed splitting headaches from last night's festivities.

Eyes met hers and quickly turned away as she passed. Whispers abounded, cloaked with suspicion and fear. Alisa fought to keep her breathing steady and stand tall beside her father.

I am the daughter of Karn, the greatest chief the wayfarers have ever known. I am burdened, but not bent. I am a slayer, and there is no dragon inside of me.

They came to the large, sun-bleached kitchen tent. One of its leather sides was propped open like an awning, allowing the savory scents to waft through the camp. Pots clanged and scraped as four clanswomen worked, finishing up the last of breakfast and packing everything for the coming journey.

Two holders worked with them, delivering food and drink for the days of travel between this village and the next. Everyone did their part in this war—if one couldn't fight, they provided for those who could. Some did so begrudgingly, but if these holders were among those ranks they hid it well.

One of the women served up Alisa and Karn's plates silently, avoiding eye-contact with Alisa. If Karn noticed, he didn't show it. After a word of thanks, he turned and guided Alisa toward their family with a hand at her back. Again, the eyes of the clan averted from hers, bringing shame's hands to clamp around her heart.

"Lift your eyes, Alisa. Your fear will only validate theirs."

“Will you speak to them? T—t-tell them I’m not d-dangerous?”

He nodded once. “Before we move out. Let them see you now, acting as you normally do, then give them time to digest the truth on the road.”

Finally, they joined the rest of their family, sitting on logs and rocks amidst trampled grasses. Kallar sat beside Hanah, while Alisa’s twelve-year-old twin cousins sat between their parents. Kallar studied her with unblinking eyes, neither smiling nor displaying any ire from the night before. He often stared like this when deep in thought, and though it annoyed her, she had learned to ignore it.

Kallar broke off his gaze and stood before Karn sat. “Karn, I would like to speak to you privately.”

Her father nodded and they walked away together.

Is it about last night? The thought made her stomach hurt. If it had to do with her mind, her future, she wanted to know.

Her cousin Taer’s voice broke Alisa from her thoughts.

“So, Alisa, we’ve been wondering something.” He spoke through a mouthful of bread and cheese, his light brown eyes sparking with curiosity. His sandy hair looked wind-tousled, as though he had burst from the tent this morning before passing his mother’s inspection.

Aunt Elani smacked her son on the arm, her beautifully dark eyes narrow and stern. “Don’t speak with your mouth full.”

Levan was a cleaner mirror-image of his brother, his hair neatly combed down and his traveling clothes less frumpy. He made a show of swallowing his ham, smirking at his brother before completing his twin’s thought.

“What does it feel like to have a dragon in your head?”

Alisa closed her eyes and swallowed. The boys were asking innocently, but the words were far too close to those of the man-children from last night.

Uncle L’non’s brown eyes narrowed and he spoke sharply. “What did I tell you about such questions this morning?”

“It’s okay, Uncle,” she whispered. Perhaps the more she explained it, the more it would help them understand it didn’t make her dangerous. She could bear the clan’s fear if her family wasn’t afraid. She met each of the boys’ eyes in turn.

“It’s like there are t-two of me in my head, one saying everything is

fine and I'm not in danger, the other p-p—panicking and hurting. They fight each other and I get a splitting headache.”

She felt eyes on her from outside her family group, but forced herself to only look at her cousins.

“When they d-d-die, I feel for a moment like I've d-died. Then the extra feelings leave and it's only me. The headache s—stays for a while, but it eventually goes away too.”

“Why do you feel it?” Taer spoke through another mouthful of ham, prompting his mother to smack him once more.

Alisa looked down. “I don't know.”

“It's probably because your powers are super-strong,” Levan offered. “I hope I'm as strong someday.”

“Maker forbid,” Elani whispered.

Alisa forced down another bite. Strength didn't have anything to do with it—if it did, there would be others among the clan with the same problem. There was no answer.

Then again, both Kallar and Karn seemed to know more than they let on. Were they talking about it right now?

She had to know.

“Boys, I'm d-d-done with my breakfast. Do you want the r—”

“YES!” they chorused.

She chuckled and scraped the remnants onto their plates.

Hanah raised an eyebrow. “Everything all right?”

Alisa nodded. “I'm going to start p-packing.”

This seemed to satisfy her mother, and Alisa hurried toward the tent. As soon as she was out of sight, she changed direction and walked cautiously in the direction Kallar had gone with her father.

It didn't take long for her to find them—their voices came from inside Kallar's tent. The soft grasses muffled her footsteps as she knelt at the back of the tent, straining to catch their words.

“—can't blame yourself.” *Kallar's voice.* “If I were a father, I would have done the same thing to train up my child. We can't operate in what-ifs and might-haves. What matters is how we help her now.”

Her father scoffed. “And you think telling her what she *might be* would help her?”

Alisa's heart raced. *What' I might be? So, they do know something!*

“You still have doubts after last night? How many empaths can feel a dragon’s pain?”

“The only way to find out for sure is to test her with dragons, which would only bring her more pain, both psychically and emotionally. No. Alísa was not made for war—I won’t see her crushed by it.”

Kallar’s voice raised. “Not knowing is crushing her right now! Her mind is tearing itself apart. If she knew she was—”

“*Might* be. And she’d want to help, despite the pain it would cause her.”

“Then let her help; I would keep her safe!”

“You’ve seen what two hatchlings do to her. Full-grown dragons dying all around her would kill her! As long as I’m around, she will not step foot on the battlefield! And you will not tell her anything!”

Alísa raised a fist to her lips as the men sat in silence. *What have I walked into?*

Her father sighed. “I know what man and dragon would do to her if they found out. For her sake, we must keep silent. Then no man will place her in danger, and no dragon will want to take her. That is my word, and you will respect it and protect my daughter. Swear it, Kallar.”

Kallar was silent.

“Swear it!”

“I swear.”

“Swear what?”

Kallar growled. “I swear I will never tell her what she is.”

“And you will never put her in a position where she might learn.”

“And I will never put her...”

Alísa snuck away quickly and quietly until she was out of earshot of Kallar’s tent, then ran the rest of the way to her family’s tent, crawling directly into her chamber under the side.

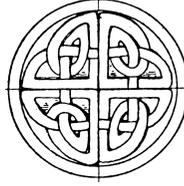
Her heart raced and her mind swam. She could barely control her movements as she stuffed her belongings into her pack, covering for her absence in case her mother came looking.

Power? What I am? Danger? Father has never kept secrets from me about my dragon empathy.

Why now?

What exactly am I?

JOY & SORROW



“Ouch!” Alísa dropped the hammer and grasped her throbbing thumb, leaving her tent-peg only partially in the ground. Somehow years of wayfaring didn’t keep her from making stupid mistakes.

“Is there a dragon nearby, Alísa?” Trísse’s younger brother Rassi laughed from his corner of the kitchen tent. “Or are you really just that clumsy?”

Alísa didn’t glance at him, though she tensed with shame and anger. *If my father were nearby, he wouldn’t dare speak that way!*

An exclamation of pain brought Alísa’s eyes up to see Trísse grabbing her brother by the ear. He flailed for her arm to relieve the pain.

“Some slayer you make—attacking one woman, incapacitated by another.” She pushed him as she let go. “Father would be ashamed.”

Alísa hammered her tent peg once more, securing her side of the tent before she stood and walked away.

Trísse came up beside her. “How am I related to that dolt?”

Alísa gave a small smile in return, but even knowing she had friends and family who would defend her didn’t fully soothe the ache in her heart. She had kept her empathy reined in all through the journey of the last two days, doing her best to avoid the disdain and scrutiny of her clanmates, but the effort exhausted her.

Alísa fingered her necklace, barely hearing Trísse’s mutterings about inheriting all the brains in her family.

Trísse hurried to get in front of Alísa and walked backwards.

“Where are you going?”

Alísa stopped and surveyed her surroundings. They were nearly out of camp and she hadn’t even noticed, walking with no destination beyond

away. Camp settled in a field just north of a grove of trees. Miles beyond the grove, a tall mountain pierced the horizon—the next target in her clan’s mission. They would reach Kannin, the village closest to it, in two days.

Alísa’s eyes flitted to the horses picketed at the outskirts of camp. A gallop in the sun would allow her a reprieve.

“Riding.” She smiled at Trisse. “Coming?”

“You have to ask?”

They hurried to the horses, each grabbing a carrot from a crate on an equipment cart as they passed. A gentle breeze rustled the grasses in an enticing song as Alísa approached a black mare affectionately deemed Sassy. Despite the horses belonging equally to the entire clan, the fleet-footed and playful mare was her favorite.

The sleek horse grazed quietly, not even looking as Alísa untied her rope from the picket stake. Alísa clicked to her, but Sassy didn’t raise her head until she held out the carrot.

“Come on, you,” Alísa scolded playfully. “I know you want to fly just as much as I do.”

Alísa smiled as the horse reached for the treat. Why couldn’t she speak to humans as well as she could animals? She almost never stammered when talking to them, or even to herself, but add one person to the mix and everything went south.

“Sneaking off, are we?” Kallar’s voice broke into her thoughts.

Alísa jumped and faced him, startling Sassy just before she could take the carrot. Alísa pulled gently on the lead and breathed low, willing her heart to settle.

“Only if r—riding across the meadow with Trisse c-c-counts as sneaking off.” She offered the carrot to Sassy once more and smiled as the horse munched. “Are you here to s—stop me?”

“Not remotely. I’m here to join you.”

Alísa fought not to sigh. *Of course he is.*

She glanced at Trisse, already mounted and waiting for her. Alísa hid a smirk. Kallar hadn’t yet grabbed a horse for himself. He would have to catch her if he wanted to ride with them.

She grabbed Sassy’s mane and jumped onto the horse, then, gathering the lead, she launched across the field after Trisse.

Alisa and Sassy flew, wind whipping through hair and mane. Releasing her empathy to the winds, Alisa let out a whoop. Horses were magnificent creatures—such power in their limbs and goodness in their hearts. Sassy’s joy emanated so strongly that Alisa could feel it without even trying. The mare must have really wanted a run—it was typically harder to read animal emotions.

Except for dragons. They were far too easy to read.

She pushed dragons from her mind and focused on Sassy’s emotions, allowing them to add to her own. The joy of freedom, of flying over the land!

“Alisa!”

Kallar’s voice was faint behind her, and she ignored it, reveling in the joy. It was like the wonder she felt when working with her father on controlling her empathic powers—the pride and happiness that came with learning what she was made to be.

Now halfway across the field, Trisse pulled her horse to the left to avoid the grove. Alisa followed suit, but Sassy resisted. How the name suited her. Alisa pulled again. *‘Never give in to a stubborn horse,’* her father would say. They had to learn that humans were their masters.

Sassy tossed her head with a squeal and danced sideways closer to the grove. The hair on Alisa’s neck began to stand on end, another of her father’s lessons coming to mind:

‘Always listen to the horse.’

Kallar called to her again, this time with urgency. She glanced back over her shoulder just as dark shadows swept across the grass. Massive green shapes blocked the sun and sent a chill to Alisa’s heart.

Dragons!

Terror strangled Alisa’s voice as she tried to call to Trisse, but the shadows had already warned her. Trisse and her horse whirled toward cover and Alisa kicked Sassy forward, gripping her mane tightly in both hands as they bolted for the safety of the grove. Kallar rode far behind them, his sword already drawn.

They entered the shadow of the trees and Alisa pressed feelings of peace into the air to calm Sassy. If she couldn’t get the horse under control, she would be pummeled and unseated by the many low branches. She pulled Sassy’s mane and spoke gently to her, willing the animal to stop.

The mare snorted, but obeyed.

Trisse entered just behind Alisa. She attempted to calm her horse, but the animal reared and pulled against her. Alisa pushed her empathy harder, further, until her power added to Trisse's and overcame the horse's natural fear.

Kallar rode closer, his horse's hooves throwing up chunks of sod. Nearly twice as high as the trees, the dragons banked lazily over the field.

"They aren't following us," Trisse observed quietly.

"They don't seem to notice Kallar, either."

Judging by their sizes, one of the dragons was an adult and the other an adolescent. The younger followed the older, copying its every move. Wonder still pressed into Alisa—the wonder of a child learning from its parent.

So, it was their joy I felt. She should have been repulsed by the invading emotions, but she had never felt positive emotions from a dragon before. It was beautiful and pure, not at all an emotion expected of a creature bent toward evil. Perhaps it would feel this way as it torched a village, but in the simple act of flying?

The thought piqued her curiosity. They stood four trees deep into the grove, so the dragons probably wouldn't notice them now. Alisa pulled Sassy's mane until the horse turned parallel with the edge of the grove, and leaned to watch the massive creatures fly.

The bigger dragon climbed high and spun blissfully, the smaller following behind with slightly less grace. The older craned its neck and breathed fire beneath it, and the younger let out its own stream. Then, trumpeting a call reminiscent of a wolf's bay, they dove toward the meadow, delight emanating so strongly it made Alisa feel like she, too, was flying.

Trisse studied her. "Do you feel them?"

Alisa nodded and Trisse's eyebrows knit together.

"Come on, then, let's get you away from their influence."

"There's no pain, no fear," Alisa whispered back. "Only joy, deep and true." She bit back the question she didn't dare ask aloud.

How can an animal ruled by evil feel such joy?

A roar brought Alisa's attention back to the field. The larger dragon fanned its wings out, its flame-colored eyes burning bright as they fixed

on something below.

Alisa's heart skipped a beat. It had seen Kallar!

The smaller dragon fanned its wings and banked left, wobbling as it flew. Despite its youth, it hadn't faltered before. *Kallar must be attacking it psychically!*

Fear and wonder clashed within Alisa, and Trisse's emanating concern turned to curiosity. They'd never been this close to a true psychic battle, nor had they ever seen the power of a dragon's attacks. The creatures hadn't followed or paid them any heed— perhaps it would be safe to stay.

She glanced at Trisse. "I want to watch."

"It will hurt you."

"We'll leave if it's too much."

She didn't wait for Trisse's response, closing her eyes and focusing until the astral plane became visible.

Blackness surrounded her. Small lights dotted the landscape like stars, created by the tiny minds of ants, beetles, and other insects. Sassy's dim brown outline matched the color of her deep eyes, while Alisa's own hands in the horse's mane glowed a stormy blue. If she focused hard enough, she could also see a deep green mist surrounding them, the manifestation of the calming empathy she and Trisse pressed into the air.

Her astral eyes latched onto Kallar, his incredibly bright blue form astride another dark-brown one. A blast of blue energy flew from his head into the sky, and Alisa followed the energy until it reached a shining amber form—the adolescent. The amber dragon formed a shield of sorts with its own telepathic energies, but it was no match for Kallar's strength. The shield shattered on impact, drawing a pained trumpet from the dragon and a swallowed whimper from Alisa.

A thunderous roar nearly made Alisa open her eyes. The larger dragon's red-orange form flew at Kallar, its jaws opened wide. Kallar and his mount dodged to the left. The dragon had probably just breathed fire at them, but flames were invisible on the astral plane.

Sassy squealed and pawed at the ground. Alisa rubbed a hand over the horse's neck, straining now to continue using her empathy. Neither dragon came anywhere near them, so they either didn't know the women were near or they didn't care. It was still safe.

Kallar continued his assault on the smaller dragon as it tried to fly out of range, striking again and again with his telepathy even as his form evaded the adult dragon's physical attacks.

Trísse whistled low. "No wonder the chief's so set on you marrying Kallar."

Alísa nodded, allowing herself a sliver of pride in her betrothed. Only the greatest of slayers could split their attention between the two realms this well.

The larger dragon abandoned its attack on Kallar and followed its offspring, taking only five wing-strokes to catch up. It flew underneath, taking one of the hits from Kallar with its own shield of energy.

A deep-brown bolt hit the adult dragon from behind. *Papá!* She would recognize that astral color anywhere. The dragon roared in pain and Alísa gasped in tandem.

"You okay?"

Alísa ignored Trísse's question, watching as a lighter brown bolt followed her father's. This one spread over the dragon's astral form like oil. Another bolt from her father struck and spread as well, adding to the coverage by the light-brown energy. They were attempting a mind-choke!

She opened her eyes and recognized the second newcomer as L'non. The adult dragon wobbled in the air under the fierce attack, then seized up and fell from the sky. Karn and L'non rode toward it, a spear in her father's hand and a sword in her uncle's. The younger dragon trumpeted in alarm and fell prey to Kallar's attacks seconds later.

As soon as the adult dragon hit the ground, Karn plunged his spear into a soft spot in its chest, killing it. Then all three men ran for the downed adolescent.

Alísa's breath caught—they would capture it for training, just like always. Her heart ached for the little dragon, whose wonder she had felt only moments ago. If they would only kill it now and end its suffering! She wheeled Sassy around and kicked her into a run, only barely catching Trísse's exclamation of surprise.

By the time Alísa made it to the group of warriors, L'non already had a rope around the young dragon's neck. The adolescent looked larger now than it had in the sky beside its parent—perhaps four feet at the withers. Kallar had dismounted and now held it in a mind-choke, keeping its

emotions from reaching her. She could only feel Kallar's triumph and her father's surprise.

Karn's eyes narrowed. "What are you doing? You shouldn't be here."

Trísse rode up from behind. "We were already out here, chief."

"Papá, p—please, don't take it back t-t-to camp. Just k-kill it now; don't torture the poor thing!"

Movement in her peripheral caught her attention. The dragon had shifted its head ever-so-slightly to regard her with deep amber eyes. She shivered; it seemed as though it were staring through to her soul.

"Help me, Singer."

Alisa froze, the unfamiliar male voice resonating in the depths of her mind. It trembled with weakness and perhaps fear, yet also held certainty, as if the dragon had no doubts she could do as he asked.

Kallar rushed to stand between her and the dragon, breaking their eye-contact. He must have felt the brief connection break through his mind-choke—indignant rage practically dripped from his every pore.

"Stay out of her head," he growled. "For that, I'll make sure you suffer!"

Someone gripped her shoulder and pulled, and she swung around to see her father.

"What did the foul creature say to you?" The intensity of his stare spoke anger, but there was fear rippling under the surface. He wasn't angry at her, but at the dragon who'd spoken to her. "What did it say?"

"He asked me for help," she whispered.

He didn't break eye-contact. "Kallar?"

"I didn't catch the message; it was too fast. But it won't happen again!" The dragon slumped as Kallar tightened his hold on the dragon's mind.

Karn frowned. "Its words, Alisa. What were its exact words?"

Alisa's mind raced. It—he—the dragon—had spoken to her as if he were a person, not just an animal. And his voice was almost human, not at all like what she had imagined after hearing the tales.

He had even given her a name, and though she didn't know why, it felt intensely personal.

She met her father's eyes.

"He said, 'Help me.' P-please, Papá, don't t-t-torture him."

Karn searched her eyes for a moment, and she trembled under his intense gaze. Then his eyes softened, and he pulled her close.

“Don’t worry, you won’t have to see or feel it.”

She pulled away. “That’s not what I mean. He didn’t hurt anyone; all he did was b—be in the wrong place.”

Karn’s eyes hardened. “We’ve been over this. It will grow to kill our people, and the boys need to learn.”

“But he—”

“Enough, Alisa!” She tensed at his tone; she had taken it too far. “Your mind is susceptible to them. You must learn to recognize their tricks!”

Her throat clamped shut as she fought back tears. She looked to the young dragon and pressed her lips together. There was nothing she could do.

“Karn,” L’non spoke quietly as he and her father forced the dragon to rise, “it’s been a while since I’ve had the boys work on stamina. I suggest we have them hold it for the night and kill it in the morning.”

The slumping dragon crawled along the ground between the two men. Alisa’s heart ached and twisted.

This was wrong. Terribly wrong. She had always hated the way they killed hatchlings, but, minus her empathic connection, it was in the same way she hated when a foal was stillborn or a chick fell from its nest to its death.

Now that she had heard the dragon’s voice, now that he had given her a name and pleaded for help, he felt like a child.

She studied the dead dragon and a tear fell to the grass. *A child whose parent was just murdered in front of him and knows he’s next.*

Kallar slid his arm around her shoulders. “Don’t cry, Lísá.”

“Alisa.” She shrugged him off. It was his fault the child fell from the sky into the hands of its captors.

She turned to Sassy, but Kallar stepped between them. He placed a hand on either shoulder and held her in place, his eyes earnest.

“You don’t have to be afraid—it won’t speak to you again. I won’t let it.”

She looked down, staring at nothing. She should say something—that she was angry, not afraid. That the young dragon didn’t deserve

death. But anything she could say could be refuted by the same argument her father just used. She was susceptible. Shapeable. Weak.

“Let me go,” she whispered.

“Alísa—”

“She said let go, Kallar.” Trisse’s tone was dagger-sharp.

Kallar glared at Trisse and lowered his arms slowly, as if to say he was only doing it because he wanted to and not because of Trisse. He stepped aside so Alísa could mount her horse.

Kallar and Trisse rode on either side of Alísa the whole way back to camp, but she barely noticed them in the midst of her swirling thoughts.

The dragon’s sapience, his personhood, was clear in her head and heart. But if she was wrong and the dragon had tricked her, how could she ever trust her own mind again? Even if she were right, there was still nothing she could do.

Nothing but suffer her heartache in silence.

* * *

The alarm horn jolted Alísa out of bed before she knew she had woken.
Dragon attack!

Her heart pounded as she fumbled in the darkness for her cloak and sword belt, yanking them from the top of her pack. How long had it been since the last attack on camp? A year? Two? Dragons were usually too smart to attack a wayfarers’ camp.

She nearly collided with her father as they ran through the living space. Karn grabbed his weapons from beside the door and bolted outside to lead the defense.

Hanah and Alísa followed close behind, stepping from their dark tent into the chaos of camp. A tent was ablaze, lighting the scene in violent red. Women and young teens ran for tree-cover. Men scrambled to aim spears and arrows at the sky. The metallic sounds of swords sliding from scabbards were accompanied by deep roars.

Dragons—at least three of them crossed and banked over camp, perhaps more!

Eldra Branni, strengthen our warriors!

Hanah stopped at the edge of the grove and waved Alísa onward. As Lady of the Clan, it was Hanah’s duty to make sure all the others got away

before getting herself to safety. Alísa's heart sank as she ran on, as with every time she left her mother behind, but Hanah never allowed her to argue the point.

Alísa pressed deeper into the grove, where the trees grew thick enough to hide her from the dragons' eyes. A few women and young teens ran ahead of her, and more followed behind, all of them afraid, but not yet panicked. They knew what to do. Shouts of anger and pain came from camp, but though her heart ached and twisted, Alísa forced herself not to look back.

Maker, forgive my boldness, but please, protect my people! I can't do anything, so You and Your Eldír have to do it. Please hear me!

An intense motherly instinct fell over Alísa as a roar sounded above the trees. One of the dragons. She stopped, her heart skipping a beat.

That dragoness was here for love of her child.

A battle raged within her. She should continue on with the women and wait out the battle. She should leave the men to defend camp and drop the beasts out of the sky.

Only, they weren't mere beasts anymore. And if the dragons were here to set the adolescent free, perhaps the battle would end as soon as he flew to them. The violence could end before anyone else—human or dragon—got hurt.

But the only way was to do the unthinkable.

She, Alísa, daughter of Karn, would have to free a dragon.

**THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES IN SONGFLIGHT,
RELEASING IN PAPERBACK AND EBOOK
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Michelle M. Bruhn is a YA fantasy author whose stories focus on outcasts, hard questions, and hope. She is passionate about seeing through others' eyes and helping others to do the same, especially through characters with diverse life experiences. She finds joy in understanding others, knows far too much about personality theories, and binge-watches TED Talks on a regular basis. She spends the rest of her free time making and listening to music, walking, reading, and snuggling with her cats.

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