



### Prologue

A flat beach of rock lit by the distant stars.

On the beach a maze of boulders, each awaiting the morning tide. Each boulder was unique, a character in a crowd, and one was a dragon.

Welkin sat among his rocks and contemplated the dim stars, these days a blurred patchwork where once they had shone sharp and bright; to the old dragon the stars were growing more insubstantial year by year.

'Ah,' said Welkin to the waves, 'but there was more magic in the world then,' He chuckled. 'And perhaps my eyes are growing old.'

Stretching rough dragon wings he shifted a knob of driftwood away from the curve of his tail and settled more comfortably into his stone platter. Yellowed claws rested easily in the grooves they had worn over the years, and the rounded sides of what had become known as Welkin's Hollow embraced him as an old friend, The night sea nestled beneath a cool and distant horizon and the only sound was that of its waves lapping gently on the sloping shelf which formed the shore.

Old and at peace, Welkin dozed, then woke, then dozed again, waiting: for the night dragons to fly.

A dragon many years his junior paused high an the cliff edge, momentarily confused by the puzzle of rocks laid out below him ... until one of the rocks coughed. His goal located, the youngster headed down towards the shore.

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Welkin stirred afresh and glanced behind him as a clattering commotion descended the cliff. A shower of clay and sharp stones pattered around him as the young dragon scrambled down the shallow gully which split the high, brown cliff-face like a smile turned on its side; the intruders eager panting was raucous over the swell of the ocean and he was calling out as his legs and flimsy wings danced and scudded on the loose scree.

'Welkin!' he was calling. 'Sir ... oops. Welkin, sir!' The youngster caught his right wingtip in a great mound of dried seaweed and tumbled off balance, turning head over haunches until the cloud of debris which had accompanied his descent delivered him unceremoniously at Welkin's side.

'Wel...' was as far as he got before he realised that he was quite winded. He collapsed into a fit of coughing. Welkin grinned.

'Well what, young Wood?' he said, pleased with the sound of the phrases over the soft wash of the sea. 'Take your time now, son,' he went on as Wood offered a healthy splutter by way of reply, 'though I think I've guessed the news you bring so ... spectacularly.'

Wood ducked as a late avalanche of pebbles scattered about them, then turned his young face up to the craggy features of the old dragon beside him. Welkin's eyes danced beneath the enclosing bony ridges which swept back along then beyond his head to become a pair of chipped and twisted horns. Grey scales flexed, pulling back from the skin around his mouth, as he smiled, and Wood finally dispensed his news.

'It's Clarion, sir. She's ... Welkin, you've got a son!'

Welkin closed his old dragon eyes as he heard the news for which he had waited so long. A son! At last, a son!

A storm of memories rolled through his mind - the swiftness of infancy, the release of flying free into the world, the years of study and training to join the Charmed ... and the ultimate failure. The sombre return home, and failure. Failure in life, in love, old age sweeping him away like a flash flood ... and then Clarion. Just when his life had seemed over... when all had seemed failure ... Clarion. She had arrived in South Point without drama one sudden autumn, old like him, her past a story untold to all but

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Welkin. Instantly friends, they had gradually found love as tender as that of the young couples who flew their courtships above them. They had become inseparable.

And now the egg that Clarion had borne, that all who scoffed had called sterile, ancient, impossible, that egg was hatched and Welkin knew his life at last had meaning. If lives can turn on a moment, he thought, then this moment is mine.

And so he sat, comfortable and old and elated, listening to the sea caressing the shore. He closed his eyes, conscious of the rhythm of the world as it turned through the sky, carrying him and Wood and all dragons towards some distant, future light.

'Um, sir?' Wood prodded Welkin's wrinkled, grey flank. 'Don't fall asleep, sir. Don't you want to see him?'

Welkin opened an eye and regarded the eager youngster.

'Clarion will call me when she is ready,' he replied. 'Have patience.'

Wood hopped from one rock to another, handling his infant wings clumsily, flight as yet an ineffectual flurry. He floundered back to the hollow and poked Welkin again, frustrated as the old dragon settled himself still further into his nest of stone.

'I'd never seen a hatching before,' he said, trying to gain Welkin's attention. 'It was all very slimy ...'

'Ssh, young Wood,' murmured Welkin. 'Come and sit by me.' Wood hopped up obediently and squatted by his elder's warm flank, absently curling his tail up and over his neck to where it brushed lazily against his cheek. 'You're right to be excited, Wood.'

Wood gazed wide-eyed at Welkin; a serious young dragon he was and it took something as important as a hatching to spark in him any kind of excitement. Welkin had often wondered what inner turmoil lent his childish features such adult expressions of concern. No doubt he still mourned his mother, but was it not deeper than that? The youngster's face was smooth, its scales still tight and glossy, but beneath...?

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And then another thought stole unbidden into Welkin's mind: My son and this one will be friends.

'Young Wood,' he continued. 'Every year on this night I come here to my hollow. Do you see where my claws have worn the rock? We're comfortable together, the rock and I.' He paused, then asked, 'Have you ever seen a night dragon?'

'One or two,' replied Wood, his gaze fixed intently on Welkin. Then he lowered his eyes and mumbled, 'My father says they're falling stars.'

'Well, whatever they may truly be, they appear in the night sky throughout the year, one here, two there. But there is one night, young Wood, when there appears not one, not two, but ten thousand!' Welkin drew him even closer. The youngster was agog, 'They are the night dragons, flying high and fast over our world, too high for us ever to reach them. And as they fly they breathe a fire so hot that we see it as a white trail across the sky. They fly high and remote, these cousins of ours, and they are dragons we shall never in our lives meet; but still they fly, one here, two there. They fly.

'But on this one night, the night dragons meet and fly in a great celebration. Thousands meet and cross; they turn and swoop; they come together for the purest expression of life their souls can make - they fly. And as they fly, they breathe fire in the sky.

'On one night each year they do this. That night is tonight, young Wood, tonight!'

As Welkin finished speaking a star seemed to shoot across the speckled blackness of the heavens.

'A night dragon,' breathed Wood in awe.

'The first of many.'

And there they sat on that summer night, two dragons from the opposite ends of life, as the sky above them grew alive with threads of fire. There was magic in the air that night, and who is to say what those dragons truly saw in the sky? Wood scarcely knew himself. He gazed, transfixed, torn in his belief. His heart flew upwards with Welkin to the night dragons,

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but there was a voice in his mind, just one, and it was his father's, speaking of rocks falling through the sky, words scorning this glimpse of incandescent magic.

And though their light was not seen by the hidden eyes of the newly hatched infant tucked warm beneath the folds of his mother's wing, perhaps the presence of the night dragons was sensed there too, and a new dragon began to puzzle the workings of the world.

Whatever those lights may have been then, or may be now, they were wonderful to behold. They moved and played, then thinned and ceased, and dragons slept.

Wood awoke as the eastern sky began to grow pale. Beside him Welkin was breathing hoarsely, the tip of his bony tail flicking restlessly among the pebbles Wood had dislodged in his tumble down the cliff.

Careful not to disturb the old dragon, Wood crept from his side and made his way back up the gully. He reached the cliff-top and glanced back down to the shore, the frown he wore comfortable on his face.

Welkin was a rough, dark shape on a grey beach. All seemed lifeless. On the cliff-top the grass was washed with the day's early gold, but down on the shore there was no colour. He could just hear Welkin's guttural breaths rasping in time with the lapping waves; the old dragon seemed at one with the sea. Wood shivered and headed for home.

The sun rose further, lighting Welkin's grey face. A shadow danced across his back. Opening his eyes Welkin saw a hornless female crossing the sunlight as she alighted before him, In her mouth she carried a tiny, brown bundle of wings. 'I'm so tired, Clarion,' he sighed.

'I know, my darling,' she replied, placing her fragile load at his feet. 'Your son.'

Welkin's eyes filled with tears as he looked upon the small, folded shape. He reached forward and moved the baby dragon's crumpled wings away

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from its face. Shut tight the night before, the infant's eyes were now open and curious.

'His eyes are watery, like mine,' chuckled Welkin.

'I had to bring him, before ...'

'I know. And he must be named.' Welkin coughed and stretched awkwardly. 'Last night I was so comfortable, but this morning ...' He coughed again, his ribs pressing painfully against his thin flesh. The air was thin and damp; it, like the whole world around him now, seemed to have no taste.

'Hush, Welkin,' soothed Clarion.

Welkin touched the hatchling with his wrinkled muzzle.

'The world is turning, little one,' he whispered. 'Ordinal has told me that great change is happening. The Charmed know it - only too well ...'

He coughed again, and then again. His son stared at him, still and calm.

'My son,' Welkin continued, although it seemed now that it was only his voice that went on, leaving the rest of him to drift further from the world and into the distant dawn. 'My son, seek the Charmed. There may be a way forward, a path to the future. Perhaps Ordinal knows. And yet, and yet ...'

As he grew weaker, less coherent, he felt that heady separation between his voice and his soul widen immeasurably. He saw his son as if from a huge distance, from the cliff-top to the shore, or perhaps from above the stars. With an immense effort he stretched a claw across the chasm to touch the infant's face, and with a jolt their gazes locked and Welkin stared deep into his son's jet black eyes.

For that frozen instant, that endless age, Welkin saw in those eyes magic and nature, pain and suffering and inexpressible joy; he saw battle and birth, tasted anger and love; he felt the world shedding its skin. And beyond it all and within it all he saw a great pathway of terrible complexity, a labyrinth both strange and familiar whose ending was shrouded in mist. On that pathway was his son, lost and alone, surrounded by dark turns and grasping shadows.

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In the distant fog something moved with the power of the stars.

Welkin's lips breathed out ... 'Fortune. Your name is Fortune ...' and at last, in peace, Welkin died.

Clarion wept silently, drawing her son close as she covered Welkin's body with her grizzled wing. There they lay, one dead, one new born, one between, as the sun turned the beach to gold, spreading colour down from the sky to drive away the grey.

Far out to sea the tide turned and as the last of the stars deferred to the light a single night dragon flew clear upwards from behind the horizon, cutting a line of pure white through the cold morning air.

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