



Chapter 1

Off where the cobblestones were uneven and residents forewent the chandelier for the lone candle, a young woman walked along the lane of crowded stores and eager shoppers. Near the end of the row, where even the candles were few and far between, the shingle swayed in the breeze. The creaking of the chain was music to her ears, calling her toward her favorite spot in the city.

“Ashton!” Galileo cried from the back of the store. “You’re just in time. Come, I have something to show you.”

Already smiling, Ashton closed the door gently behind her. Behind the cluttered counter, Galileo’s messy shock of white hair was barely visible over a clay sculpture of a slumbering dragon. Little dragon eyes twinkled at her as she crossed the room. The red tint of the hide made it appear as though the dragon rose from the earth itself.

“It’s beautiful.” Ashton marveled at the graceful curves of the scales that somehow made her feel as sleepy as the creature appeared to be. There was something different about this dragon, though, something she couldn’t quite name.

“You haven’t seen what he can do yet,” her grandfather said, turning to fetch something from the shelf behind him.

Ashton, standing a head taller than the old man, watched his jaunty movements with pride. *I wish I had half his creativity.*

He returned with a small pot of oil, which he poured into a hole at the top of the slope on the sleeping dragon’s back. With a well-practiced hand, Galileo used a waxed wick to capture the flame from a nearby candle and touch it ever so lightly to the nostril of the sculpture.

Almost immediately, flames leaped from the dragon, making Ashton step away in surprise. From a slightly safer distance, she admired the true beauty of what her grandfather had created. The flames, no doubt fueled by a river of oil inside the dragon’s body, escaped through little slots cut in the top of the dragon so they formed the spikes running down its spine. That’s what had been missing from the original sculpture, Ashton realized. But they weren’t missing at all; they were simply made of fire instead of clay.

“Magnificent,” Ashton said truthfully, watching her grandfather’s eyes light up. Though he had undoubtedly watched the fire come to life on the dragon countless times already, his delight hadn’t lessened. He crouched down again so his eyes were level with the counter, perhaps getting a different perspective on his art.

“I know,” he said happily. “The Lord of Bethia has already ordered three for his home to be sent by cart within the month.”

“You truly are something else,” Ashton said with a laugh. “I don’t think there’s a baron within

fifty leagues who doesn't have one of your creations adorning his home."

"Gives boring structures character," Galileo insisted, pulling a smaller dragon on a hanging lantern from underneath the counter. He walked to the front of the shop and hung it next to the door, where it was sure to attract the attention of his dedicated customers. The elderly craftsman returned to his stool and absentmindedly stroked the wings of his favorite figurine, a gleaming black dragon with sweeping horns and a proud stature. His expression was unusually content as he gazed at his sculpture, and Ashton thought she knew why.

"A new record?" she asked.

Galileo smiled slyly. "Fifteen hundred brakons."

"I understand why you won't sell that particular figure, but why won't you at least duplicate it?" Ashton asked, not for the first time.

Her grandfather was a skilled artist and could easily replicate the intricate glasswork involved, especially now that he had the stable furnace her father had helped him engineer.

But Galileo shook his head. "Brindisi must be one of a kind. She can't be copied and especially not for wealth. She'd never glow again."

"I've never seen her glow at all," Ashton said.

"Maybe you've yet to need the light," Galileo responded with a small smile.

Ashton smiled too, even though she had no idea what her grandfather meant. He often spoke in riddles she didn't understand. Galileo was the city of Olmerta's oldest active member, adored for his wise counsel, sharp wit, and of course, his fantastic dragons. He'd seen more years than Ashton could imagine, and this became obvious when his quips

and comments made no sense to his seventeen-year-old granddaughter. Even when the villagers didn't understand all the old man's beliefs and habits, they valued his trade above all else.

Galileo didn't only make ornaments with wings; he loved any challenge. The sleeping dragon with flaming spikes was just the beginning. He made tools, keys, and special inventions, each with a signature dragon engraved or as an embellishment. At this point, there wasn't a house in the village that didn't have at least a dragon hairclip about.

Ashton brushed her finger across the jagged peak of a sculpted mountain, a dragon's tail winding around its base. "Grandfather, do you really think dragons live in Silent Mountain?"

"My dear, I have nothing if not faith."

"In something that you've never seen?"

"Especially in the things I've never seen."

"But why haven't we seen them?"

"Perhaps there is no need. Not yet, at least. The day will come when the skies will be filled once again with dragons."

"But is that a good thing? Most people fear the return of the dragons." Ashton looked at the floor, embarrassed to admit she doubted some of what her grandfather said.

"That's because they're listening to the wrong tales. They don't know the truth," her grandfather said.

"The stories you tell are so different from the ones coming from the palace. You tell of heroic deeds and friendship. The other stories are dark and sinister. How do you know yours are right and the others are wrong?"

Galileo gave his granddaughter a loving look. “Because your grandmother told me.”

She shifted uncomfortably, tucking her short, black hair behind an ear. She loved both her grandparents, but before her grandmother disappeared, she had spouted things that didn’t make any sense. Ashton had assumed the old lady’s mind was going.

“Did it ever occur to you who benefits from townsfolk fearing dragons?” he asked.

She shrugged. “I can’t see how it benefits anyone one way or the other.”

The bell above the door jingled, and Galileo pushed himself from his stool to greet the visitor. “I’ll let you think on that a while.”

Ashton stroked the smooth scales down Brindisi’s spine once before leaving the store.



Chapter 2

“Some might question whether his interest isn’t more of an obsession,” Nikolai Cabot said, his lip curling into a sneer. “He litters this town with every dragon depiction his wild imagination can conjure.”

“They are a symbol of Olmerta. What harm does it do?” Lukas asked his uncle. He tore off a hunk of bread and passed it to his father sitting at his left.

“The only symbol of this city is my sigil!”

“Come, brother. A sword in a fist is too much. It screams of power, yes, but it doesn’t endear those who can’t afford their own sword,” Earl Stephan said.

“It reminds them more of tyranny than—”

“You had no trouble picking up the sword,” Nikolai cut off his nephew.

Lukas recognized the dark look in his uncle’s eye and realized his misstep. Bowing his head, he saluted with his open hand over his heart. Lukas prayed for the right words to ease the tension. “Chancellor, I am your humble servant and will carry my sword where you tell me to go.”

“That’s what I thought.” Nikolai pushed away from the dining table and stood. With his hands

clasped behind his back, he paced the length of the room.

While his uncle's attention was elsewhere, Lukas placed another helping of meat on his plate; his father followed suit.

"What's going on with the town of Melak?" the chancellor asked.

"We received a fine shipment of ore from them this week. We've loaded the wagons with the lumber we promised them in payment, and they are scheduled to depart tomorrow," Stephan said between mouthfuls.

The chancellor continued his pacing, muttering to himself. "If the wagons come under attack, they may never reach Melak."

"But there's no reason to suspect an attack," Lukas said. "I'm escorting the wagon to the town. We haven't had trouble in this area for years."

Nikolai turned on Lukas. "Yes, but if something were to happen to the laden wagons, we must do everything reasonable to ensure the safety of the travelers. Don't worry about the lumber. Our debt is paid once we cross into their territory."

Lukas stopped cleaning his plate with his bread and looked at his father. Likewise, the earl was frozen midchew.

"How many men ride with you tomorrow?" Nikolai fixed Lukas with a stare.

He swallowed hard, sitting up straighter. "Ten men, Uncle."

"You've been training the young nobles, have you not? Perhaps this is an easy mission to cut their teeth on."

"Yes, sir."

"Go now, both of you. I have things to consider."

Father and son rose from the table, bowed slightly, and saluted. As they left the hall, they heard Nikolai bellow to his servants to fetch Bayard.

Outside, Lukas and his father headed for home. “What was he going on about?” Lukas asked once they had gotten far enough away from the castle to lift the feeling of watchful eyes and listening ears.

Stephan avoided looking directly at his son. “Keep your mind on your business. Do as you’re told.”

“But a trip to Melak is a monthly routine. We’ve never had trouble in the past. Why would Uncle Nikolai be speculating about bandits?”

“He probably doesn’t want you getting overconfident and sloppy. Anything can happen on that journey.” Stephan kicked a stone as they walked. He passed it to Lukas as he had done when his sons were little and learning to play crocus.

Lukas kicked it to his father absentmindedly. “We have drills on how to react to attacks. Do you think we should drill again tonight before setting out?”

“No, you’re ready. Best wear your mail, though. Have your team dress in their full gear as well. It’ll make a good impression on the people of Melak when they see you gleaming on the horizon.”

They passed the rock back and forth until a bad kick sent it skittering off the footpath.

“What does Uncle Nikolai have against Galileo?” Lukas asked.

His father sighed. “It’s not Galileo exactly. It’s what he stands for.”

“He’s simply an old man who tells great stories.”

“Ah, yes, but he tells stories about the days when there were dragons.”

Lukas looked sideways to see if his father was serious. “Do you believe dragons are real?”

“What I believe isn’t important. My brother doesn’t want any talk of dragons. He perceives the stories undermine his rule.”

“It’s not as if believing in some oversized lizard will make a difference in whether or not people pay their tithes.”

“You needn’t concern yourself with Nikolai’s beliefs. Just do your job.”

The hardness in his tone stung Lukas. In times past, Stephan would have joined in the gentle needling of the chancellor, and they would laugh together.

By now, they had reached the gate to their sizeable manor house. Almost like a peace offering, Stephan placed a hand on his son’s shoulder. “Are you still making a trip into town?”

Lukas nodded.

“Meeting up with anyone in particular?” Lukas caught the sly smile his father tried to hide.

He blushed. “I’m not a schoolboy to be mocked about a perceived infatuation, Father. I have many friends in town.”

“Well, don’t be late for supper. Your mother will have my head.”

He watched his father push through the iron rods woven together to mark the entry into his family’s estates. As the gate clanged closed, the flat surface in the center was conspicuous by its lack of a crest.

A sadness rushed over Lukas at the not-so-subtle show of power his uncle’s reign had over the family.



Chapter 3

“You should see the latest dragon Grandfather has made,” Ashton said as she walked with Lukas beside the lake. “Fire comes from spikes on its back.”

“He has the greatest imagination. I still have the dragon he carved for me when we were little. Remember? The ones we painted? Mine was fiery red,” Lukas said.

“I still have my blue one by my bedside.”

They walked in comfortable silence for a time.

“Did your uncle say any more about your match?” she asked, trying to keep her voice neutral.

Lukas shook his head. “No, he has other things on his mind.”

“But will you at least get to meet her first?”

He shot her a look that warned her to stop nagging him.

She changed the subject. “What do you have planned for tomorrow?”

He stooped to pick up a rock and skipped it across the pond. “I’m escorting a wagon of lumber to Melak.”

She rolled her eyes. “That sounds exciting.”

“Mayhaps.” He had gone unusually quiet.

“Shall I ride along? I haven’t been to the boundary in ages. My Sheba would enjoy the change in scenery as much as I would.”

“No, next time maybe. Listen, I should be going. It’ll be a long ride tomorrow, and I need to ensure the wagons are secure and the team ready.”

“Okay.” Ashton was surprised and more than a little disappointed. “Come find me when you return, and we can practice our archery. I’ve gotten quite good. I think I’ll earn back that five brakons I lost last time.”

“Sure,” he replied absently, then he returned the way they had come without so much as a wave.

Ashton picked up a flat stone, tracing the edges with her finger before sending it skipping across the mirror surface of the water that reflected the dark clouds above the Silent Mountain. “One, two, three, four, five!” And Lukas wasn’t here to see it.

Ashton heard the rumble before she felt it. A tremor shook the ground, causing the water to lap against the boulders as if trying to escape. There it was, again. If not for the damp rocks, she would have thought she imagined it.

She wondered if her grandfather felt it, too.

Where the lake met the main road to town, Ashton followed the mule carts and villagers who were hauling their fresh catch to the market. Lost in her thoughts, she idly tossed a chip of bluestone into the air and caught it.

A firebolt broke across the darkening sky.

Villagers stopped, gazing in wonder at the display. Moments later, another stream of fire caught the thatched roof of the tailor shop, and it went up in a *whoosh*. Screams came from within. Villagers scattered; some toward the safety of the trees, others to fetch buckets of water.

At first, Ashton couldn't believe her eyes. *Fire in the sky?* It made no sense. She had never seen lightning like this.

A hand grabbed her sleeve and pulled her along. Shaking her head to regain her focus, she followed the stranger and fell in position beside fellow villagers for the bucket brigade.

A strong wind blew across her face, and Ashton looked to see if the fire would spread. The flames still shot directly skyward. She stole a glance at the trees, but their leaves weren't even stirring. She received the water bucket handed to her, quickly turned, and passed it down the line, turning to get the next one. Even amidst the shouts of terror and commands to assist with the fire, she marked the breeze as significant in this otherwise calm weather.

It seemed like hours before the blaze was extinguished. The wounded were stretched out on the grass in the center of the town square. Ashton watched as the healer covered the face of one with a grimy sheet. As the bucket brigade broke up, she worked out the kinks in her back and legs. Her arms were leaden weights from passing the heavy load for so long without a break.

Stumbling, she traced the path the buckets had followed. Others were already immersed in the icy waters of the Moss River, still fully clothed. Ashton joined them and dunked her head to rinse the soot from her hair, thankful it was short and easy to deal with. Her mother had braided her long hair, but after she died, a little girl's hair was too much for her grandfather to handle.

Washing quickly, she spent as little time in the chilly water as necessary. Tomorrow she would take a proper bath in the Silent River, where the waters

ran warm. For now, she was grateful to have the acrid smell of smoke and burnt flesh mostly washed away.

She made her way home along the river rather than using the lane to town. When she found the right path, Ashton followed it into the dark forest, the cricket chirps and frog croaks accompanying her. Even without the moonlight, her footsteps were sure and confident. Nearby, she sensed something larger tracking her passing. She had lived long enough to know there were many creatures in the world; as long as she didn't bother them, they didn't bother her.

By the time she broke free from the trees and reached her front door, she was shivering from the cool air on her soaked clothes. She stripped down as much as she dared, leaving her wet things outside, then dashed into the cottage for a warm blanket.

Her grandfather sat by the hearth working a piece of wood with his knife. Having changed into dry britches and a tunic, Ashton joined him at the fire. She allowed the warmth to seep into her as she watched her grandfather work.

"Thanks for starting the fire," she finally said.

"You looked like a drowned rat," Galileo said. "What happened?"

"Didn't you hear? The tailor shop caught fire."

Galileo dropped his hands to his lap. "Was Clivus mixing his dyes again?"

Ashton shook her head. "I know this sounds silly, but I swear the fire came from the sky."

"There were no storms today, girl. Only a few dark clouds over the lake."

"I didn't say it was a storm."

The glow of the fire cast shadows from the goosebumps on Galileo's arms.

He peered at her under his bushy eyebrows. "Are you sure? Tell me exactly what you saw."

She cleared her throat, feeling a little foolish. “From nowhere, a flame streaked across the sky. I thought for sure it was my imagination. A few seconds later, another shot struck the roof of the tailor shop. After that, everything was in chaos. People running and screaming.” Ashton’s voice trailed off.

“There’s something you aren’t telling me.”

“You’ll think I’m crazy.”

He placed a rough hand on her shoulder. “I’m the crazy one in this family. There’s no room for another.”

She offered a small smile and took a deep breath. “For a second—but only a second—I thought I saw something else in the sky.”

“Did this something have wings?”

She stared at him. “But how did—”

He waved away her question. “It was in the sky. How else would it get there?”

She chuckled at his calm acceptance, then she became serious again. “There was a flash of color when the flames were . . . released. Then it was gone.”

“Did anyone else see this?”

She shook her head. “Not that I know of. No one said anything, and I wasn’t about to blurt it out. We were a little busy dealing with the fire.”

“Others didn’t see. I wonder why.” He stroked the wood he was holding with his thumb, speaking more to himself than Ashton.

“Grandfather, you can’t be thinking of dragons. I know the stories, but there has to be another explanation.”

Suddenly, he jumped to his feet. “I need to go to the shop. Don’t leave without putting that fire out. One disaster today is more than we need.”

“But, Grandfather, what’s—”

“Don’t you worry about it. We’ll talk when I return.” With that, he was out the door.

Ashton picked up the piece of wood her grandfather had been working on. She could barely make out the head of the dragon trying to break free from the block.



Chapter 4

It was well past midnight when her grandfather returned. Ashton padded out of her room wearing a long nightdress, her feet bare. The lantern she carried cast shadows around the room.

“What’s going on?”

Galileo was distracted. Ashton guided him to a chair at the table, covering his lap with a quilt made by her grandmother.

“Have you eaten anything? You ran out of here so fast, you missed dinner.” She hurried to put together a cold meal of meat pie and fruit. “I can warm some stew for you if you like.”

He said nothing, lost in thought. When Ashton placed his dinner in front of him, he pushed the food around with his knife, not even pretending to eat.

“I know it’s not like Mama used to make, but my cooking isn’t that bad.” Just mentioning her mother caused a lump in her throat.

Looking up, he attempted a smile for her sake. “I’m sure it’s wonderful. I’m not hungry, that’s all.”

“What has you so anxious?”

“They’re back,” he said in a hushed voice.

“Who’s back?”

“The dragons.”

“What? That doesn’t make sense. Dragons are . . .”

“Not real? Is that what you were going to say? After all I’ve taught you? Don’t you listen to my words?” The disappointment showed on his face and shot an arrow through Ashton.

“I . . . I don’t understand,” she stammered. “Assuming dragons are real, why would one attack our village? You said they were our friends.”

“They were.” He ran a gnarled hand through his thinning white hair, leaving it sticking out at odd angles. “Something’s wrong.”

She collapsed into the chair across from him. She had never seen her grandfather this way. “How long has it been since they were seen in the sky?”

Galileo stood, stepping on the quilt now puddled on the floor at his feet. He picked his carving knife and block of wood from the mantle. Inspecting the grain, he turned the emerging dragon one way then the other, catching the lantern light. “I’ve told you stories of the dragons in the early days when they lived in harmony with humans.”

“I remember. The woman found a dragon egg and kept it safe until it hatched. The baby returned to its family of dragons. When it was fully grown, it came to the old woman to express its thanks. Thus began the partnership between human and dragon.”

“I’ve spared you the details of when humans fell from grace, causing a rift between our kinds.” His knife worked as he spoke. “Those stories have fallen away over the years. No one wants to talk of the evil things we’ve done. People would rather pretend they didn’t happen and not take the responsibility.”

Ashton wrapped the discarded blanket around her shoulders as Galileo took up his tale.

“Men grew foolish and arrogant. They didn’t understand the many blessings it was to have dragons on their side. They resented raising livestock to keep the dragons fed and set out to cull their numbers through hunting, even going so far as to make a sport of it.” He shuddered.

“Villager turned against villager. We are descendants of those who were against this behavior. Your grandmother’s ancestors led the people who fought to save the dragons. They destroyed the traps, and the dragons disappeared.”

“Where did they go?” Ashton asked.

Galileo only shrugged. “At one time, some knew the secret. But the affairs of man got in the way.”

Ashton positioned herself directly in front of her grandfather, forcing him to look up from his whittling. “But why have they returned now? Can we stop them?”

Moisture stood in his eyes as he took her in. “Only the queen dragon can stop them.”

For years she had heard the stories but thought that’s all they were—stories. She prayed her grandfather wasn’t losing it.

“So how do we find her?” she asked when he seemed to drift into his thoughts again.

“That’s why I went to the shop tonight. There must be some way to find them again—to make peace.” Returning the carving to the mantle, he wiped his hands on his worn trousers. “I’ve been saving this book to pass on to you when you were older. I don’t know how accurate it is or even what it holds.” He pulled out a blue leather-bound book, tattered at the corners. His fingers traced the strange symbol embossed into the hide.

“Before she left us . . . unexpectedly, your grandmother passed this to your mother.” Galileo swallowed his emotions. He didn’t often mention her grandmother’s disappearance. “When your mother died, I saved it for you.”

He took Ashton’s hand and turned it palm up. Gently, he placed the small book in her grasp.

She was surprised at the weight. She started to open the cover, but Galileo stopped her.

“This is for no one else’s eyes.”

“Why me?”

“Read it, and maybe it will explain.” He patted her hand covering the book. “I’m going to turn in. We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

The old man turned from the room; his usual spry step replaced with a weary shuffle.

Ashton took the seat by the empty hearth. Her mother had once held this same book. Perhaps she also sat by the light of the fire when her mother gave it to her. She wished her mother was with her now so they could read together as they used to. Her parents died more than fifteen years ago, but the memory was still painful. When they left on their trip, they promised to bring back a surprise. A twinge of guilt and shame caused her heart to pound when she remembered how angry she was when her grandfather said her parents weren’t coming back. As a young child, her first thought had been that she wasn’t going to get her gift.

Taking a deep breath, she said a silent prayer for her parents and her grandparents. Then she opened the cover.