



DRAGONSLAYER



DUNCAN M. HAMILTON



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CHAPTER

1

Brother Poncet crouched on the scree-covered mountain slope clutching his cream robe about himself, and watched his comrade, Brother Ambrose, inch into the pitch-dark cavern before them. He remained a few paces behind, still out in the sunlight, although at that altitude it did little to warm him. Up that high, it was always cold, even in summer.

Brother Ambrose lifted his small magelamp up to the darkness. The glowing sphere was caged in a mirrored housing, so all of its power shone into the blackness before him. The light reached in, but not far enough to fall on any surface.

“See anything?” Poncet said, his breath misting on the air. Poncet hated the cold, and counted the moments until he could get back to the campfire and his bedroll. Going home would be even better, but that wasn’t likely anytime soon. He had thought himself lucky when the Order had recruited him several years before. Now, he wasn’t so sure. Crouching in the cold on the side of a mountain was very far removed from the adventures he had imagined back then.

“Nothing,” Ambrose said, scratching his thick black hair. “Just darkness. Hlllllooooooo!”

The sound of his voice bounced around in the abyss, repeated time after time.

“You shouldn’t do that,” Poncet said. This was his first mission, and he was determined not to see it go wrong through foolishness. Ambrose didn’t seem to have the same concern.

“Why not?”

“You never know what’s in there.”

Ambrose laughed. “Afraid we’ll get savaged by a mountain goat?”

“No.” He thought for a moment and realised his comment was born from

a fear of the dark, the unknown. Something only children were supposed to be afraid of—not a brother of the Order of the Golden Spur. Finally, he came up with something worthy. “A belek, perhaps.”

“It’s summer. Even up this high, it isn’t cold enough for them. They stay where the snow is. Commander Leverre told us so.”

Poncet noticed that all the mirth had left Ambrose’s voice, even if he still sounded confident. Only a fool took belek for granted. Even if Brother-Commander Felix Leverre told them to the contrary and swore it on his mother’s grave. “Ever seen one?”

“Once, when I was young,” Ambrose said. “The Duke of Trelain used to hunt them every winter. Sometimes the king would travel west to join him. They rarely found any, but I remember one year when they did, and killed it. Not before it had killed half a dozen huntsmen and the Count of Dreville, though. They paraded its body through the streets of Trelain. Like a cat, it was, but the size of a bear. A big bear. Fur the colour of steel and fangs as long as your forearm.”

Even with all of his training, Poncet didn’t like the idea of meeting such a creature. He wondered if that made him a coward, or if experience would ease his fear of such things—if each mission he did would bring him closer to the calm confidence of Commander Leverre.

“We’ll have to go in for a closer look,” Poncet said.

“It’s probably just another dead end.”

“Probably, but Brother-Commander Leverre said it’s close. We need to search every corner.”

Ambrose sighed. “We could search these mountains for a lifetime, and not find anything. We don’t even know what we’re looking for.”

“The commander does. It’s not for us to question our superiors. We simply do what we’re told. I want to be back by the fire as much as you do.”

“What we’re told,” Ambrose said. “We’ll need more light for starters. The cavern looks big; we’ll be quicker if we send back to camp for the others.”

“Should we bother them?”

“You said yourself that Commander Leverre thinks we’re close. Every hole we look into now might be the spot. Need to be thorough.”

Poncet nodded. “I suppose I have to go?”

“It’s your turn.”

Poncet bundled his robe up around his knees and started down the rocky slope, careful not to get his sword tangled between his legs. The mountains

were littered with caves, but few were big enough to provide good shelter from the elements or to require much manpower for a proper search. Ambrose's description of the belek planted enough of a seed in Poncet's mind for his imagination to do the rest. As hard as the scramble up and down the mountainside was, he was glad they would have strength in numbers for the search. Gladder still that Commander Leverre would take charge, freeing Poncet from any difficult decisions.



Brother-Commander Leverre stared into the cavern's pitch-black maw, giving his eyes time to adjust in the hope of being able to make out something. However, the darkness was complete, and no amount of time would allow him a glimpse of what lay within. Darkness in such a remote, wild place was always unsettling, but he could do something about it.

He closed his useless eyes and held out his hand. Ignoring the shuffling and muttering of his subordinates, he focussed his mind entirely on his task. A tingle started on the skin of his hand and spread over his entire body. Leverre smiled at the familiar and welcome sensation, then smiled even wider when he felt something else—a dense concentration of magical energy. The Fount, and far more intense than he had ever encountered before. It was just as the Prince Bishop had described. This had to be what he was looking for. When he opened his eyes, he could see the bare skin of his hand glow with an ethereal blue light for a moment. He wondered if the feeling of exhilaration he experienced every time he used magic would ever leave him. Considering how long he had been at it, he doubted it.

"I don't know if we've found it," he said, "but there's definitely something here." He could see the look of relief in the faces of his people. They had been searching the mountains for weeks, and it had taken its toll on them all. Their Order was still ostensibly a secret—while their existence was not concealed, their purpose and true nature were, on pain of death. That meant they couldn't take advantage of the few comforts that could be found in these remote areas, instead having to stay away from any hint of civilisation and make their beds wherever they could find a dry, sheltered spot. The thought that their search might be over excited even him—not just the prospect of going home, but what success in his task would mean for his career.

He pointed his finger into the cavern, and focussed. A stone's throw away, a glowing orb formed, casting light on rock that had likely never felt its touch

before. He repeated the process a half-dozen times until all parts of the cavern in view were illuminated. He admired his handiwork and enjoyed the impressed sounds his people made. Creating a magical light was a simple enough thing, but to cast it at a distance, many times in a row, spoke to the skill of the caster, and none of the others were nearly powerful enough to achieve such a feat. Nonetheless, he could feel the strain it had placed on his body, and knew he needed a few moments to recuperate.

“Begin the search,” he said, concealing the fatigue that gripped him, so as to maintain his aura of power. He remained still as the dozen sergeants, corporals, brothers, and sisters made their way past him and into the cavern.

Only the two sergeants were able to wield magic with any strength. The rest could detect the object they were looking for if they got close enough, but most would need another five or six years of training and experience before they could do anything useful. Despite that, they were among the best the Order had. They would improve, but it was the next generation from whom the true rewards would be reaped. Such a slow process was frustrating, but even if the progress was slow, the gains were always worthwhile. Leverre’s own had been few and far between recently, and he suspected he had reached the plateau of ability his late start had imposed upon him. In a few years, the younger acolytes would surpass him. Until then, though, he would enjoy the awe with which his people viewed him.



Alpheratz opened one of his eyes and shut it immediately. The light cut through him like a lance and startled his already befuddled mind. It took him a moment to gain control of his thoughts, to place them in order and make sense of them. He tried to open both eyes, slowly this time, controlling the amount of light until he had grown accustomed to it.

He was careful to remain perfectly still. That part of his mind that sought survival over all else was in control, and it screamed danger. When Alpheratz could finally open his eyes completely, he could see there was something odd about the light. It was not how he remembered light to be—an intricate tapestry woven of infinite colours. This illumination was flatter, less interesting. There was no depth or beauty to it. It was then he realised he was not alone. He took a deep breath and listened. The sound of water dripping into a pool somewhere echoed through the chambers of the cave. It was joined by scratching, shuffling, and another sound—the voices of men.

That caused his heart to quicken, though his mind was still befuddled. How long had he slept? What had woken him? Might it only have been moments? He fought through the confusion, trying to remember what had gone before his sleep. There had been men then, too. Might these be the same ones? Warmth began to return to his limbs. Alpheratz knew he had to have slept a long time—an unsettling thought.

There was energy in the cavern, energy spilling from clumsy, unskilled magic. It was not as satiating as a proper meal, but enough to invigorate his stiff muscles. He took another deep breath and stretched his limbs. His sinews popped with each movement and he feared that he would be heard. He paused and listened once more. There did not seem to be any reaction. He could pick out pieces of conversation—they were looking for something, but it did not seem to be him. That was odd. Were they not there to kill him? *How long have I slept? Weeks? Months? Longer?*

He stood, wavering. The magic in the cavern could only do so much to restore him, and his muscles refused to obey commands. Alpheratz felt weak, weaker than he had ever known. If the men were here for him, he feared they might be able to best him. The thought of hiding in the hope that they might not notice him was tempting, but an orb of light appeared in the alcove where he had slept. His decision had been forced. He shook his head in distaste at the clumsiness of the magic used to make it and concluded that the person who had cast it was not powerful. They were unlikely to trouble him too much. The orb liberally spilled energy into its surrounds. Enough that Alpheratz was able to heat his flame glands.



Brother Ambrose carefully navigated the rocky outcrop. Its edges were sharp, the cavern floor uneven, and everything was damp and cold. A slip and fall could easily result in a cracked skull, and not even Commander Leverre had the power to mend that. Ambrose reached out with his mind to survey the area before him for the object. He felt frustrated by how little he had been told about it—*an object, magical, you'll know it when you find it*. He felt certain that even using magic, having a more detailed description would make the process easier. How do you find something when you don't know what it is? However, as he constantly heard from his instructors, it was not his to question why. Accept, have faith, open your mind—these were the only answers they ever gave him.

His heart jumped when he felt something. It was unlike anything he had sensed before; it was even different from the first time he had opened his mind to the Fount and felt its boundless energy all around him. He brushed his misgivings aside, filled with the excitement at the prospect that he might have found what the Prince Bishop so desperately wanted.

He stumbled forward, toward the edge of the light provided by Commander Leverre's magic. Two great, glassy orbs appeared before him, their brilliant emerald green reflecting the meagre light. It took Ambrose a moment to realise that this could not be what he sought, and another to realise that the orbs were far too large to be a belek's eyes. By the time he screamed, the first tendrils of flame were already rushing toward him.



There was little left of the man by the time Alpheratz drew back his breath, but enough to momentarily quell the rumbling in his stomach. Unlike some dragons, he had never developed a taste for humankind. Too stringy, too bitter, but in a bind it would do, and Alpheratz could not remember having ever been so hungry. He could feel the effect of the warm meal in his stomach immediately. He rolled his shoulders and gently ruffled his wings as some of his strength returned. He needed a proper feed to be fully restored, and unless his ears deceived him, there were several more people between him and something he would actually like to eat. They would have to do for now.

Alpheratz stood again, his legs protesting at the movement, and started forward. Familiar features told him he was in his cavern, though it looked sadly neglected. Glancing at himself, he saw that he, too, looked worse for wear. His once lustrous scales were covered in moss, mildew, and grime. It worried him to think of how long he must have slept, and he wondered what the others thought had happened to him.

He rounded an outcrop that led out to the front chamber. A man stood before him, staring, frozen in terror. Men had always feared dragons, but Alpheratz had never seen a reaction so pronounced. He chuckled as he squirted a jet of flame at the man, turning him into a pillar of fire long enough to burn off his cream robes and any other extraneous parts; then Alpheratz swallowed him whole.

More were dotted around the cavern, shuffling about in the dark spots as though looking for something. They had always been vicious little pests, and Alpheratz didn't hesitate in slaughtering them. Their frailty came as a

surprise—the last humans he had faced had been formidable indeed. He could remember, now, returning to his cavern, badly wounded. He had crawled to the back of the cave and collapsed, exhausted. The question of how long ago still bothered him.

He killed the last of the humans and forced them down, his stomach now protesting at the excess of food rather than the lack of it. He lay down in the cavern's mouth, looking out over the land before him. Farther down the slope, he could see one of the little cream-robed vermin running and tumbling downhill, trying to get away. Alpheratz considered going after him, but didn't think it worth the effort. He had cleared the vermin from his home and had eaten more than enough. He needed to rest and digest, then visit the other peaks and find his kin.

Pillowing his head on the cavern lip, he surveyed what was once his domain and wondered if it might be still, or if another young dragon had come and claimed it during Alpheratz's slumber. It looked little different, but it felt a great deal so. He could taste the magic on the air as he breathed. It was so strong—stronger than he had ever experienced. Mankind had sucked so much of it out of the world with their brutish efforts to use it, but now it had returned in full blossom. As he drifted off to sleep, he dwelled on that comforting thought to keep away all the disturbing ones that threatened to keep him awake.

CHAPTER

2

Guillot sat at his usual spot at the end of the small bar in the only tavern in Villerauvais. It was quiet, as usual at that time of day—everyone else from the village and the surrounds still toiled, either in the fields or in the village’s few, small businesses.

His spot afforded him the succour of the back wall of the pokey little room when he became too drunk to sit upright any longer, which occurred at some point most evenings. Usually the tavern keeper, Jeanne—former wife of the long-deceased previous owner—let him be, only interacting with Guillot to refill his glass. Today, however, she had remained absent from the bar since his arrival.

He cleared his throat and rapped a knuckle on the bar. He was without doubt her best customer—often her only customer—and seeing as he always paid his way, he expected more attention. That was not even taking into account that he was seigneur of the village and the lands surrounding. Surely that had to count for something too.

He heard approaching footsteps, then the creak of the door behind the bar. “What do you want?” Jeanne said.

Guillot shrugged. Was the answer not obvious? Nonetheless, her tone bothered him.

She looked at his empty glass. “We’re out of wine.”

Guillot chuckled, but when the stern expression on her face didn’t change, he stopped.

“How can you be out of wine?” he said. “We make it in the village.”

“Tax, Gill. Tax.”

He wondered if he would ever be referred to as “my Lord.” He supposed his father had been the last “Lord Villerauvais.” He had always been “Gill,” and it seemed he always would be. “Tax?” he said. “I don’t collect taxes.”

“You don’t.”

Jeanne continued to glare at him as though he had done something bad to her. Had he? He searched through the cloud of booze and hangovers that shrouded his memory and came up with nothing.

“Lord Montpareil,” she said.

“What of him?”

“He’s collecting taxes here now.”

Guillot’s mind was too dulled by the hangover from the previous night’s drinking to rouse much anger. Insulting though it was, to have a neighbouring lord exert authority in his demesne, he felt greater concern over how to get his glass filled. He shrugged again.

“It all ends up with the king,” Guillot said. “It’s as well Montpareil collects it as I do. Which I don’t.”

The look of contempt on Jeanne’s face was likewise of less concern to him than getting his glass filled. He gave her his most charming smile but she was unmoved.

“Five years, Gill. We were all happy to have you home, but you’ve been rotting here for five years. The village and all the lands are rotting with you. You’d break your poor mother’s heart if she still lived, gods bless her soul. Don’t think for a second that Lord Montpareil has authority to collect taxes here, or that a single penny of it’s getting to the king. Anyhow, some of that tax money should have been spent here in the village. In case you haven’t noticed, we need it. It’s your job. Him collecting them is an insult to you and an injury to us.”

Gill spread his hands in a beseeching gesture. He’d never expected to hear a complaint about not collecting taxes.

“Something needs to change, Gill. You’re dragging us all down with you.”

There were demesnes in Mirabaya where a vassal could be flogged and hanged for speaking to their nobleman like that. He was glad she felt free enough to say what she thought, but what she said wasn’t to his liking at all. Who was she to say how he lived his life? He knew of plenty of others who were far more decadent than he, taxing their vassals to the bone, then pissing it up against a wall. He only pissed away his own family money.

Jeanne sighed and shrugged. “Maybe we’d be better off with Lord Montpareil. Anyhow, there’s no wine today. No reason for you to stay.” She turned, and with a creak of the door, left Gill alone. He swore, then stood and sham- bled out.



Gill sat on his porch the following morning, after a fitful night's sleep, and watched the lone horseman ride toward the village. His once fine, but now ramshackle, townhouse on the edge of the cluster of buildings that formed Villerauvais afforded him a clear view of anyone approaching, which was a rare occurrence. He drew on his pipe, hoping this person had not come to see him. He hadn't been able to find any wine in the house and his mood had soured as a result—not that he was ever particularly welcoming to visitors. Their only saving grace was that they were rare in Villerauvais. It was a village at the end of the road. There was nowhere to pass through to.

This person was either lost, or going to make a bad day worse. Gill hadn't had a drink since Jeanne had cut him off the previous day, hadn't slept well, and was now approaching his longest period of sobriety in memory. He was in no mood to receive a guest.

The horseman was well dressed in what Gill felt confident in assuming was the latest fashion in Mirabay, and had a colourful feather in his wide-brimmed hat. He didn't look like a dandy, though. His clothes, fitted and cut to allow movement, were the type worn by men who made their living with a sword. It was hard to imagine what a man like that wanted here—there wasn't much call for professional swordsmen.

The rider drew up by Gill's porch and doffed his hat. He looked at Gill as though they knew one another, but Gill couldn't place him. That wasn't to say they hadn't met, however. There were plenty of blank spaces in his memory of life in Mirabay. Even more since then.

"It's been a long time, Lord Villerauvais," the newcomer said. "You look . . . well."

Gill remained lounging on his rocking chair, his feet resting on the low railing surrounding the porch. His dusty, scruffy boots—including the hole in the left sole—were displayed to anyone who cared to look.

"I look ill and hungover," Gill said, "which is true on both counts. But I'm afraid you have the advantage of me."

"Of course." The rider slipped down from his saddle. "Banneret of the White Nicholas dal Sason at your service."

Gill shrugged.

"There's no reason for you to remember me," dal Sason said. "I was a boy when we met at court. Before I started at the Academy."

Not knowing how to respond, Gill shrugged again.

“To business, then. The king requests that you return to Mirabay.”

“Ah,” Gill said, stroking his moustache. He had a response to that, but kept it to himself. If the shrug had seemed unfriendly to dal Sason, this answer would scandalise him. “I must admit that comes as something of a surprise,” Gill said. “I rather thought that old Boudain had forgotten about me.”

“He had. He’s dead. I bring his son’s command. King Boudain the Tenth.”

“I hadn’t heard. It can take news some time to reach us out here. When?”

“About six months now.”

Gill nodded. He wondered if the news had truly not reached Villerauvais, or if he was the only one that it had passed by. The latter struck him as far more likely. First Montpareil encroaching on his rights, now this. Jeanne was right, loath though he was to admit it.

“I can’t imagine you were thrilled by the prospect of coming all the way out here.”

Dal Sason shrugged now. “It’s the king’s command, and it’s my duty to obey. As it is yours.”

“The *king’s* word?”

“The new king is his own man,” dal Sason said. “He’s cut from very different cloth than his father.”

“So he’s forced the Prince Bishop to retire to his estates?” Gill said, his voice pregnant with irony. Prince Bishop Amaury’s cold corpse would have to be prised from his throne when the happy day of his death finally arrived.

Dal Sason blushed. “He’s still at court.”

Gill felt his temper flare. “Let me guess. On this occasion—as with all occasions in my experience—the king’s command reached you via the Prince Bishop’s lips.”

Dal Sason was silent a moment, then sighed. “The king’s word is the king’s word. Orders under his seal are orders under his seal regardless of who hands them to you. You of all people should know that.”

Guillot’s eyes flashed with anger. If there had been a sword within reach, he would have grabbed it.

“I apologise,” dal Sason said, raising his hands and taking a step back. “I didn’t mean anything by that.”

“You may tell the Prince Bishop that I politely decline the king’s summons. I am no longer a courtier and am needed here to manage my estate. Should the Prince Bishop choose to take issue with this, you may tell him to charge

me with whatever he pleases, and I shall kill whoever the king's champion is at my trial. As I did the last time." Guillot's gaze followed dal Sason's to his gut, which strained against the button that held his trousers closed, then to the hand that gripped the arm of his chair to keep from shaking. In his heart he knew that a child with a stick could likely get the better of him now. "I apologise for your wasted journey."

He started to gently rock his chair, took another long draw on his pipe and allowed his gaze to drift out to nothing in particular. Despite his effort to effect nonchalance, his curiosity was piqued. What could possibly convince the Prince Bishop to seek him out after all that had passed between them?

Dal Sason remained where he was, his mouth opening every so often, then closing again without a word. He had barely had time to dismount and had already failed his mission. Guillot sighed, feeling a pang of guilt.

"There aren't any inns here, but Jeanne the Taverner has a back room she can let you sleep in if you want to rest before returning to the city. Go to the end of the lane and turn left. You can't miss it. The food's good too. Everything's fresh. A benefit of country life. Probably best not to mention you're an acquaintance of mine."

"The benefits of country life are clear to be seen," dal Sason said with a hard edge to his voice. "I'm sorry for having bothered you, my Lord, and wish you good day." He mounted, doffed his hat, and rode on.

Guillot watched him go. He thought of dal Sason's parting words and looked himself over. His clothes were old, his gut more prominent than it had been the last time he had paid it any attention, and it was several days since he had last shaved. Four, he thought. Perhaps five. Nonetheless, he had the irritating feeling he had not heard the last of the matter. The Prince Bishop was not a man to refuse in the old days. Gill doubted the years had mellowed him.

Still, what use might Gill be now, considering how long it was since he had held a sword or gone to sleep sober? Perhaps Jeanne was right. Perhaps he had allowed too many things to get away from him. Then again, how fastidious did a man need to be about himself to oversee lands that produced artichokes and unremarkable grapes? In a place like Villerauvais, there was little to do but drink to the sun as it passed through the sky.

Realising his pipe had gone out, he had set about refilling it when a shrill voice broke the renewed quiet.

"Gill! Gill!"

Gill groaned. He seemed destined not to have any peace that day.

“Gill! Gill!” repeated the voice.

He wondered if his first step in taking firmer control of Villerauvais should be to demand that his vassals address him with the proper formality. It seemed likely the window of opportunity for that had long since passed. No one would have dared to call his father by his given name—not even Gill had done that.

“You have to come, Gill!”

The voice belonged to one of the village boys—Jacques—who was no more than seven or eight years old. Judging by his ruddy face, he had run the whole way from the small farm he lived on with his family.

“Father says you have to come,” he said, between gasps, as though adding the authority of his father—a tenant farmer working a small patch of Gill’s land—would lend the request sufficient weight to assure it was acceded to.

“What is it?” Gill said, trying not to be overly harsh on the boy, who was likely only following his father’s instructions.

“Father wouldn’t tell me. He said to bring your sword.”

This caught Guillot’s attention. There wasn’t much that could go wrong in Villerauvais that needed a sword to put right, and Guillot was well enough acquainted with the boy’s father to know he was not an alarmist. His first thought was that Montpareil might have taken to more aggressive tactics to collect taxes that weren’t his to collect. That could indeed mean a fight, and one Gill thought likely to see him bleeding out on a patch of artichokes before the day was done. It had been a long time since Guillot had strapped a sword belt around his waist. If he was being honest, he had not thought the cause would ever arise again—the region was too poor for bandits, he was no longer an officer in the king’s army, and most would agree that he had no honour left to impugn. He glanced at the straining button at his belly and feared his sword belt might not fit.

“Tell him I’ll be along directly,” Guillot said, getting to his feet and grimacing at the creaking in his knees. Inside his house, he opened the chest in the hall by the door. The hinges protested, reminding him of how long it had been since he last opened it. A purpose-built compartment contained three rapier and dagger sets, each blade glistening with preservative oil.

Few men could claim to own three Telastrian steel swords—the rarest and finest metal from which a blade could be made. Possibly he was the only one. Two he had won, the third he had inherited. Many young men dreamed of winning the Sword of Honour at the Academy in Mirabay. Only one did each

year, as he had. The medium-width blade was a jack-of-all-trades, supposed to serve the wielder equally well on the battlefield or in a duel. Whatever career a young graduate might embark upon.

The second was something few even at the Academy dared dream of, with a narrower, lighter blade, more suited to duelling than anything else. The annual Competition drew the finest swordsmen from around the Middle Sea—usually masters or graduate students from each country's Academy of Swordsmanship—and that second Telastrian sword was Gill's prize for winning it. It seemed like half a lifetime ago. He supposed it almost was. The smile the memory brought him soured quickly.

The final blade was old and named, with an indecipherable etching in old Imperial along its fuller. It was called "Mourning," although Guillot had no idea why—perhaps something to do with all the men it had killed. The hilt was unfashionable and plainer than the others, but its dark Telastrian steel, swirling with blue accents, had a quality that the others did not—a quality that said "great deeds and heroic feats have been done with me." Its origin was so shrouded by the mist of time that it was almost legend. Its first owner—a distant ancestor of Guillot's—was one of the founding Chevaliers of the Order of the Silver Circle, a famed dragonslayer, champion of the king, and all-round overachiever. *Difficult shoes to fill*, he thought. Guillot had once been a member, though the Silver Circle was but a shadow of its former self by the time of his induction, little more than a gentlemen's club with drinking, gambling, and whoring as its aims, with the occasional duel thrown in.

His hand hovered over the named blade for a moment, but to touch it felt as though it would sully it. It deserved better than he. To use it for lesser feats such as those he might accomplish was to shame it, and to display it on his waist was an appalling concession to vanity. Guillot snatched the Sword of Honour and its matching dagger from their felt-lined resting places and put them in their scabbards. A deep breath got the buckle secured at the last hole on the belt and he was ready to go. He almost felt like a swordsman again.

Jacques was still waiting outside, impatiently shifting his weight from foot to foot. As soon as he set eyes on Gill, he tore off in the direction of his home. Gill followed, albeit with far less energy.

CHAPTER

3

Alpheratz woke again, this time comfortable in the knowledge that he had slept for no more than a few days—he could still feel the bulk of his meal straining against his belly. A meal of that size would take him nearly a month to completely digest. He drank in the view that never failed to capture his imagination; great limestone peaks covered in snow soaring over verdant valleys. It was the domain of dragonkind, given to them by the gods in gratitude for their fidelity. He remembered the different peaks not by the names man had given them, but by the names of the great dragons who had called them home. His gaze lingered on Nashira as he wondered if she still lived, or if she had been killed during his slumber. The thought made his stomach twist in despair.

His memory was better now. He could recall how mankind had taken it upon themselves to hunt down and exterminate dragons. There was great wealth in those mountains—metals and minerals that they coveted. At first trade had kept them satisfied. They had farmed cattle and sheep and bartered them with the dragons for access to the mountains. Letting them in had been a mistake. They had learned too many secrets.

There were special places, sacred places. Wells of energy where the very essence of the world bubbled to the surface. Places where the gods had walked when dragonkind was young and mankind were few. Men had learned of them—sometimes with the guidance and help of dragonkind who wished to help mankind. Humanity's magicians were never satisfied. They were always hungry for more power to fuel their wasteful efforts in shaping magic. They sought out the secret places. Coveted them. They tried to murder dragons by trading diseased and poisoned meat. Their outrages continued and increased, until dragonkind would take no more. Conflict followed.

Alpheratz's thoughts drifted to Nashira. The remembered sight of her

soaring around her peak still made his heart race. His battles with Pharadon to win her affection had been ferocious. Pride swelled in his heart to think that he had prevailed in the end. He still wasn't sure how. With his greater size and lustrous red scales, everyone had thought Pharadon would be the one she chose, but it had not happened that way.

He wanted desperately to see her again. It was not unheard of for males to retreat deep into the mountains for decades—even centuries—after mating, but it would have been uncharacteristic for him. The question of why she had not come to look for him, to wake him from his slumber, popped into his mind, but he dismissed it quickly.

He scanned the sky for any sign of dragonkind, but saw none. On such a magnificent day it seemed impossible that none would be soaring around their peaks, revelling in the beauty of the world. Might they be hiding? Their absence was cause for concern, but he stopped short of hasty speculation.

He stretched his wings, then hesitated. He still felt weak. The Fount had strengthened him somewhat, the meal more so, but he was still feebler than he had been as a hatchling, hiding in the folds of his mother's wings. He needed to know what was going on, and there was no way he could walk all the way to Nashira's peak.

Alpheratz breathed deeply. The Fount tingled along his teeth, down his windpipe, and deep into his lungs. He tensed his shoulders and walked forward. Extending his wings as far as they would go, he threw himself from the mountainside. At first he fell, and something that had once been second nature felt like an unknown skill. He strained, willing his wings to grip the air, feeling its cold touch as it whistled past him at ever greater speed. His heart raced as he tried to remember the movements that had once come without thought. Finally he felt his wings catch and it all came back to him.

Soaring up, he rejoiced in the sensation. The air was rich with the Fount, like fertile soil, and it tingled against his flesh where he was not covered in scales. He allowed himself a moment to revel in it—he looped and rolled and dived between peaks until his muscles and lungs reminded him that he had slumbered for a long time. He climbed high, turned toward Nashira's peak, and allowed himself to glide with the wind.



“Nashira!” It was rude to enter another dragon's cave without permission, even if she was his aerie-mate. Alpheratz called again, but there was no answer. If

she were sleeping, he would apologise for waking her, but he could wait no longer. Her cave was dark and damp. She had never been the tidiest, but it was unkempt even for her.

“Nashira!” Alpheratz said again. Still no answer.

He continued moving deeper into the cave. Entering her sleeping chamber without invitation was insult enough to fight over. Nashira would be within her rights to kill Alpheratz for such presumptuousness. He called out one last time, then walked into her sleeping chamber.

She was there. A wave of despair washed over him. What was left of her was there. Alpheratz coughed in anguish. Her once beautiful golden scales were gone. The metal contained within them was considered even more valuable than that mined from the ground by the menfolk. Their mages used it in their magics. Nashira’s horns and fangs had been pulled from her skull; more ingredients for human potions. Bones were all that remained of her.

Alpheratz thought he would be sick. There were scorch marks on the ceiling, all around. Hers and theirs. She had put up a hard fight. She would have. It was her character, and part of what he loved about her so much. His heart filled with rage and grief. She was the most beautiful of spirits, the most gentle of souls, and they had killed her.

Her character was not the only reason she would have fought so hard. Half a dozen eggs were nestled in a nook at the back of the cave—all split open. One still had the handle of an axe sticking out of it. The pain felt like it would crush Alpheratz. His rage grew until he could find no clarity of thought. The eggs were destroyed. The eggs they had created together with so much love and care. All of their brood, murdered before they had the chance to crack the shells of their eggs.

Alpheratz stumbled outside, overcome with grief. He was flying back to his cave before he knew what he was doing. He headed toward his deepest chamber, far within the mountain. It was the place where he hatched, where he could always find comfort. He thought back to what he remembered of the wars, trying to work out what might have happened.

The first violence had occurred far to the south. A sacred place was violated, and the dragon tasked with its custody reacted in the only way he could. He slew the men who had done it.

The men should have understood. They had broken the agreements and deserved the consequences. Events escalated from there. Men in shining armour travelled to the mountains to earn fame by slaying dragons. There

had been glory in those battles, and Alpheratz had come to respect some of those men, brave despite the impossibility of the task they had set for themselves. Some were so skilled they had even managed to kill a dragon. It was honest battle, bravely fought. Little different than when two dragons came to blows.

Then the mages came. They changed things. They always attacked in large numbers. They drew so hard on the Fount they could completely drain it, leaving the grass brown, the plants wilted, and any dragon unfortunate enough to be close severely weakened. They brought a different type of warrior with them: men touched by magic. Men who could do things, survive things, that no ordinary man should have been able to. That was when the tide had turned against dragonkind.

When a dragon was weakened by magic, the new warriors could corner it and kill it. This was not a battle; it was slaughter. Murder. The men had been unlucky with Alpheratz, however. His mountain was one of the sacred places. It housed one of the ancient stones, the wells, where the Fount was so strong it could be seen with the naked eye. The mages had drawn on it so hard they had extinguished its ethereal blue glow. Even now, it remained shrouded in darkness. Draining it was something Alpheratz had not thought possible, and in his moment of distraction, the men had dealt him a great blow.

The mages and their warriors had thought he was finished, and grew overconfident. What little Fount remained had restored enough of his strength for one more act. He had allowed them near enough to touch him. One had laid his hand flat on Alpheratz's snout and told his comrades a joke. They had not laughed however—the punch line had coincided with the brazen one being swallowed by flame, something the others experienced moments later. The memory made Alpheratz smile, but did little to quell the sorrow in his heart or the rage boiling his blood.



Perched on a rocky outcrop, Alpheratz watched the valley intently. He had never paid much attention to men until they started hunting and killing dragonkind. Then he had done his best to stay away from them. Fighting had never interested him much—except to win Nashira's affections—but now he could think of nothing else. They had murdered her. Murdered his young.

A cluster of small buildings straddled a stream some way down the hill. Stone chimneys surrounded by golden thatch puffed smoke into the air. People

had been wandering about earlier, but all seemed to be inside now. Contained. It would make what he planned all the easier.

His muscles were still wasted and his flame glands were shrivelled. He didn't have the strength to chase them or to blast flame about with abandon. In their tiny houses, they would be easy prey. He waited for the light to fade a little more, giving him greater advantage with his superior eyes, then stretched his wings, allowing them to bite into the air and carry him down to the village below.

As he glided close, he squeezed his flame glands. At first, nothing happened. He worried that he had over-taxed them in the cavern. It took time for the glands to fill the bladders, but he had heard of those who had overstressed their glands, damaging them beyond use. They had not lived long. There were only so many peaks where a dragon could dwell, and if you couldn't defend yours, your life would be short.

He breathed a sigh of relief as he felt the glands compress and tasted the welcome flavour of the fluids as they sprayed from his mouth and ignited on contact with the air. The thatched roofs were dry and caught quickly. In his first pass, he set light to every building in that small hamlet. The smell of the smoke and the sensation of the heat as he passed over a second time were a joy. The screams that followed were music to his ears. The screams had stopped by his third pass, but still he revelled in the flight, the flames, the fury. When finally he stopped spraying the hamlet with flame, little remained. The fire was so intense that the village burned to ash in only a few minutes.

He landed to take a closer look at his work. It satisfied him deeply to see how easily man could be erased from the face of the land. In a single growing season, there would be nothing left to suggest people had lived here. Though it had been easier than he had expected, it had left him tired again. In his eagerness, he had reduced the animal pens to dust, and there was no nourishment to be had.

He needed to rebuild his strength, to feed regularly. He took to the air once more, looking for food this time, rather than vengeance, though the latter was never far from his mind. Menfolk had ventured too far into dragon country. They had killed his aerie-mate and their brood. Men would ever be his enemy. They would suffer. They would burn. They would learn their place in the world and never dare to test their betters again. He would drive them back to their little island in the middle of the great sea with such prejudice that they would never dare set foot in these hallowed lands again.

Alpheratz spotted a larger village in the distance, one with outlying farm buildings that would provide plenty to eat. He needed to be careful, though. A larger settlement might mean soldiers—perhaps magicians and their special warriors—and he was not yet ready to deal with that. He looked around again and saw a farm a distance away. Better. His target picked—a large barn that he hoped was filled with cattle or something else to sate his appetite—he swooped.

CHAPTER

4

Gill was out of breath by the time he reached the farm, well behind Jacques. The boy's father, Alain, worked a small patch of land tucked into a bend of the river that ran through the limestone valley that was the Seigneury of Villerauvais. Upstream of the village, it was one of the most picturesque landholdings in Gill's demesne, with a magnificent view of the village, the manor house, and the limestone crags, pastures, and lush green forests that surrounded them.

Jacques's agitation had grown as they had neared the farm, and Alain's expression when they arrived at his small house confirmed Gill's impression that something serious was afoot. It seemed odd that after so long undisturbed, two events coincided on the same day. The world could be an unpredictable place, he thought. Perhaps he was just unlucky?

"Good afternoon, Alain," Gill said.

"Good afternoon, m'Lord."

Gill raised an eyebrow in surprise. *Serious indeed*, he thought. Other than dal Sason, he couldn't remember the last time someone had called him "m'Lord." "Your boy seemed rather in a state when he came to fetch me."

"Run on and help your mother, Jacques," Alain said. He watched the boy run off before turning his attention back to Gill. "Something I need to show you."

Gill followed him along a dirt path between two small fields toward where Alain grazed his small herd of sheep. His curiosity grew with each step, and he was beginning to think that Lord Montpareil was not involved. In the centre of the pasture was a large, circular scorch mark, like the black stain left by bonfires on festival nights. Gill could see what looked like the charred remains of four, possibly five, sheep in the burnt patch.

"A little overdone, I'd have said," Gill said. He grimaced when Alain didn't

react to the attempt at humour, but considering half of his flock had been lost, that was not surprising.

“Found them like that this morning,” Alain said, his eyes locked on the carcasses.

Gill’s vassals rarely sought his help, and considering what Jeanne had said, he felt he at least had to appear to be making an effort. He knelt by the burnt patch and touched it with his fingertips.

“Did you see anything?” Gill said.

“Nothing.”

The grass was burned to dust and there was little enough left of the sheep. It had been a hot fire, which would have needed lots of wood and taken some time to reach that temperature. It struck him as unlikely that Alain would not have noticed the effort required to create such a blaze. It was quiet there at night; you could hear the river and every insect. The fire could not have been built without making some noise, and that did not take into account rounding up and killing the sheep. Not to mention the fact that there didn’t seem to be any remnants of the fuel. No wood or coal.

“Who’d do this?” Alain said.

“Who indeed?” Guillot said. Coincidence and mystery, he thought. Montpareil, perhaps? But why? The Prince Bishop? He needed to have another chat with dal Sason.



Dal Sason was eating soup when Guillot walked into the tavern. Beside his bowl was a bottle of the wine Jeanne had sworn she did not have. Guillot cursed under his breath as he strode over. Dal Sason watched him approach, spoon paused mid-air, soup dripping back into the bowl.

Guillot sat down at dal Sason’s table. “I’m having trouble with a coincidence.”

“Really?”

“You turn up the day after something very unusual happens on my land.”

“What was that?” dal Sason said.

“You tell me. Did you bring some soldiers with you? Hungry ones, perhaps? What’s going on?”

“I came here alone,” dal Sason said. “As fast as my horse could carry me. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Guillot sat back and scrutinised him. He didn’t appear to be lying.

“I was going to call on you again later,” dal Sason said. “I’m not one to run home a failure. The Prince Bishop was emphatic in wanting you back in the city.”

“Why does he want me?”

Dal Sason shrugged. “I’m only the messenger. I’m not privy to the reasoning behind my orders.”

“You have no idea what the Prince Bishop, or the king, want of me?”

“None.”

Guillot swore. Jeanne humphed from behind the bar.

“You’d be making my life a lot easier if you simply agree to come back to Mirabay with me.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I return alone, and who knows? Perhaps they’ll send a regiment to fetch you,” dal Sason said.

“The Prince Bishop wants me to come back that badly?”

“The *king* wants you to come back.”

Guillot drummed his fingers on the table and studied dal Sason once more. “Look me in the eye and tell me you don’t know anything about the burned sheep.”

Dal Sason frowned, looking confused. It was enough to be certain he had no idea what Guillot was talking about.

“There’s no need to answer,” Guillot said. “There’s some trouble with one of my tenants, so it’s not a good time to be thinking of heading off on a jaunt. I don’t want to come back and find them all at war with one another. I’m sorry if breaking the bad news goes hard on you, but I’m not going back with you. Tell the Prince Bishop to send a regiment if he wants me that badly.”



Guillot woke to hammering on his door. He put on a robe and gathered up his sword. It occurred to him how quickly old habits returned as he reached the door. It was long after dawn, and the bright light hurt his eyes. He had fallen asleep on the couch, without a bottle, which was in danger of becoming the norm. Unfortunately, it felt as though he had been drinking—all the hangover, none of the fun. His head pounded and his body felt drained. All he wanted was to crawl into bed and sleep the day away. Or to lay hands on a bottle. Either would do. He opened the door, torn between feeling the need to be polite and welcoming and the desire to vent his foul humour.

"I'm sorry for disturbing you so early, m'Lord," the woman at the door said.

Her name was Celeste, a farmer's wife, although he struggled to remember exactly where their farm was. *Somewhere down the valley?* he thought. Guillot did a double take at once again being called "m'Lord." Was it the sword?

"What's the problem?"

"Philippe, my husband, sent me to fetch you. Our herd was attacked during the night." If the farm was down the valley as he thought, it was as far from Alain's as you could get while remaining on Guillot's land.

"Give me a moment," he said. "I'll come and take a look."

He went to his room and dressed quickly, then joined her. They walked side by side in uncomfortable silence, she no doubt unsure of how to make small talk with a nobleman, while he had no idea of how to make small talk with one of his vassals. They had not gone far before sweat beaded on his forehead, though it was not a hot day. His head throbbed and his stomach complained with all the characteristics of a hangover.

They passed through the village and along the lane that led to the farms farther down the valley. Philippe waited for them by a large scorch mark in his pasture that looked very similar to the one in Alain's. At its centre were the carcasses of two cows.

Guillot's stomach turned over, an odd feeling considering the air was filled with the delicious smell of freshly roasted beef. What had happened was not an isolated incident, and it stood to reason that it might happen again. Unless someone stopped it. That someone would have to be him. The thought made the throbbing in his head escalate to pounding. It was not proving to be a good day for sobriety.

"Do you have any idea what happened?" Guillot said, not hopeful of getting anything useful from the farmer or his wife, who stood behind him.

"I . . . I . . . I don't know," Philippe said.

"Tell him," Celeste said between her teeth.

Guillot raised an eyebrow.

"I was out in the yard last night taking a p—" His wife backhanded him across the arm. "I was out last night . . . doing my business," Philippe said, "when there was this whistling noise. Not too loud, mind, just like a gust of wind. Then this great big ball of fire appears and smashes down into the pasture."

The local grapes might produce more bad bottles than the average, but that didn't stop anyone from drinking it, least of all Guillot; so he was in no posi-

tion to criticise, but his initial reaction was that Philippe had been in his cups the night before. There must have been something very wrong with Philippe's bottle to cause that kind of hallucination, however.

"You're certain?" Guillot said. "A ball of fire?"

Philippe nodded hesitantly.

"That's not all," Celeste said. She nudged her husband.

"After the fireball hit the ground, and my cattle, there was something else. A shadow. A great, dark shadow came down from the sky. It ate them."

Guillot frowned and turned back to the burnt remains. There was barely any meat left on the bones, as had been the case with Alain's sheep, but Guillot had assumed there that the flesh had been burned away and hadn't investigated further. He walked up to these remains and gave them a proper look. Here and there he could see white, rather than burnt black, bone. The pale patches looked as though they had been hit with a large, heavy blade. An axe, or a great sword, perhaps. The rapier strapped to his waist could not have caused marks like them. What kind of animal could leave a mark like that?

He shook his head. The answer had to be far simpler: the Prince Bishop was toying with him. He must already have men in the area, and soldiers needed to be fed. He had sent men to wreak havoc on Guillot's demesne to convince him to agree to whatever he wanted from Guillot. It was infuriating, but there was little Guillot could do. The further he had fallen, the higher the Prince Bishop had risen. Guillot could raise his levies and patrol the farms at night, but they would need weeks of training to stand a chance against soldiers, and like as not his force would only arrive after an attack had occurred.

The Prince Bishop knew all that, of course. It was galling to know the man could still reach out from Mirabay and play with Guillot's life. Perhaps Guillot was being too sensitive—after all, it had been many years since he had left Mirabay and he had not spoken with the old king since the day he'd left, nor the new one. He had no influence, no career, no fame. What did he have that might make the Prince Bishop jealous? Could the man's old hatred still burn so deeply?

Gill supposed it could be a belek. They rarely came as far down from the mountains as Villerauvais, and never at this time of year, but he supposed they could inflict wounds such as those on the carcasses. Might a rogue one be stalking the demesne? It seemed unlikely, but more plausible than the alternatives he was coming up with. A belek didn't explain the scorch marks, though. The fireball, he reckoned, could be put down to bad wine and an

over-active imagination. Guillot had seen equally strange things while drunk, only to discover the next morning that they had occurred nowhere but in his head.

“What did it look like?” Guillot said. “The shadow?”

Philippe blushed. “Don’t rightly know, my Lord.” Another nudge from his wife. “Feels foolish saying it out loud,” Philippe said, “but it reminded me of how dragons are described in the old stories.”

“Dragons?” Guillot said, doing his best not to laugh.

Philippe shrugged.

“Dragons,” Guillot repeated, looking back at the charred bones, wondering if perhaps the time had come for him to have all the seignery’s vines pulled up and replaced with something that could not be fermented.



No banneret in the king’s service could be expected to give up easily, all the more so when the Prince Bishop was involved in handing out the instructions. Dal Sason was inspecting fruit at a market stall when Guillot walked back into the village. The visitor greeted Guillot with a nod and a warm smile, which Guillot made no effort to return. He still felt sick and now had the added worry that either his demesne was under attack by dragons or his vassals were going mad. Perhaps he had imagined the whole thing? His mother had always said if something seems too good to be true, it probably is, and the thought of insanity being the explanation did indeed seem too good to be true at that moment.

He couldn’t forget the old stories of the Chevaliers of the Silver Circle, that gilded fraternity of decadent wastrels. He’d thought the older Chevaliers were simply trying to frighten him with the hocus-pocus of their midnight initiation ceremony at a strange, ancient carved stone in the crypts beneath the old citadel in Mirabay. He had thought them nothing more than an idle ceremonial bodyguard to the king, a place where a safe career could be made while he settled down and started a family. The Chevaliers had seemed like the perfect solution for a country nobleman of modest means and his beautiful young wife in a big, expensive city. The fame he had won with his victory in the Competition had opened the path to advancement and he had seized it with both hands.

Guillot was drawn to the Chevaliers. As a boy, he had loved the old tales of their deeds, of dragon-slaying and derring-do—stories of Andalon, Ixten,

and Valdamar, the most famous of the dragon-slaying Chevaliers. As a man, he had never been under any illusion as to what their modern brethren represented. He even questioned how much of the old stories was true. After all, he'd never seen any dragon remains. Even after so long a time, with so many said to have been slain, surely some trophies would remain? So far as he knew, none did.

While stories of the Chevaliers had filled his head with too much nonsense to completely discount Philipe's tale, he could not quite believe it. As he watched dal Sason squeeze and smell fruit and vegetables, he wondered how much more the man knew than he was letting on. Questions would have to wait, however. He felt terrible and knew that only sleep would ease his suffering. Dal Sason and the mystery in the fields would keep until morning.

CHAPTER

5

Amaury dal Richeau, the Prince Bishop of Mirabay and the Unified Church, First Minister of Mirabaya, blinked the sweat from his eyes and launched into a fast combination of cuts and thrusts, driving the salon master back down the fencing gallery.

“Excellent, my Lord, excellent,” the fencing master said as he retreated.

Amaury smiled at the praise. The salon master—an Ostian by the name of Dandolo—was regarded as the best private trainer in Mirabay. He was always frugal with his compliments, irrespective of his trainee—professional duellist or nobleman—so to get it was worth one of Amaury’s as-rare smiles.

Out of the corner of his eye, the Prince Bishop could see one of his assistants appear at the gallery’s doorway. The momentary distraction allowed Dandolo the opportunity to riposte and score a hit, and the Prince Bishop stretched another smile and nodded to acknowledge the blow.

“I think that will be enough for today, Maestro,” Amaury said, raising his rapier in salute. He waited until Dandolo had returned the gesture before turning to his assistant.

In his clerical robes, the assistant looked out of place in a fencing salon, but at least he had the presence of mind to offer Amaury a towel and a glass of water. He took both, then wiped the sweat from his brow and took a drink before speaking.

“What is it?”

“The king wishes to see you, your Grace.”

“Of course he does. Did he say why?”

His assistant remained silent.

“Ah,” Amaury said. “Silence can often say far more than you might think. There’s a lesson in that. Tell him that I’ll attend him directly.”

With a nod, his assistant left. Amaury placed his training sword in its leather sheath and went to the changing room. As he peeled off his sweaty fencing clothes, he could not help but glance at the place on his hip where he had carried a wicked scar for the greater part of his adult life. The memory of it, and of the resultant ruination of his career, would be forever with him, even if the physical damage was all but gone. A less powerful man might have had to explain the disappearance of a severe limp, of a lingering injury that had ended any hope of a career as a swordsman or soldier, but not he.

No one had so much as raised an eyebrow when he started walking normally again. The leg was far from perfect, merely healed to the limit of the healer's magical ability, but with a little luck, his plans would come to fruition. Then he could personally finish what the Order's healers had started. He wondered why people had been content to live without magic for so many centuries. Indeed, they positively hated it. If only they knew the benefits it could bring, he felt certain their opinion would change. A few repaired joints, a few cured children, and they would welcome magic back with open arms. He needed to be careful picking the time, but it was growing near.

He would not be able to keep his order of mage-warriors secret forever. The old king had known of them, as did the new one. No secret known by three men was much of a secret, even if one was dead. The young monarch's scrutiny of his recently inherited kingdom had been inconvenient for Amaury, but thankfully King Boudain the Tenth had seen the sense in his project. He'd set it in motion soon after discovering a treasure trove of ancient and forbidden knowledge in a great vault beneath Mirabay's cathedral. The archive had re-opened the way to the practise of magic, something that had been outlawed for centuries, since the bannerets of old had overthrown the mages who had, in their turn, usurped the empire. The opportunity had been too tempting to pass up, so he had, in secret, established the Order of the Golden Spur. The Spurriers. He had known it would be a long-term project, one that would take decades to bring fully to fruition.

Training new mages properly was a lengthy task. Work had to start when the candidates were children, and they would be of little use until they were grown. Some progress could be made with adults, but the later one came to magic, the less power one would ever be able to wield. That was Amaury's own curse. Parlour tricks were the most potent magics he could create, and he knew he was too old to ever get any better.

The books spoke of those born with a natural affinity for magic. He had found one or two such people, but no one with the kind of power he had read of. The books also spoke of the Cup—and that could change everything. He had to find it first, however, and that was proving more challenging than he liked. He knew he had to be patient—never his strong suit. But the day would come when it was in his possession, and the power the Cup would bring with it would be awesome. No nation in the world would be able to stand against Mirabaya. No leader would be able to deny the absolute primacy of the church. *Amaury's* absolute primacy.

As he took his bishop's robes from the locker, Amaury wondered if he would have achieved even a fraction of his wealth and power if he had lived his life with a sword in his hand, rather than a prayer book. It seemed unlikely. Not until he'd been cured had he fully realised how much he had missed fighting with a sword in hand, though only now, after several months of practise, did he feel he was approaching any sort of competence. His skills were still a long way from what they had once been, but to have reclaimed anything at all was deeply satisfying. Nonetheless, it wasn't seemly for the Prince Bishop of the Unified Church to be frittering away his time in fencing salons, so he had done his best to keep his hobby a secret.

Covering himself in a hooded cloak, he left by the back entrance. It was only a short distance to the palace from the salon, so he wouldn't keep the king waiting for long. He briefly considered taking the elevator up to the palace, which sat on a hill overlooking the city. The elevator was a wooden contraption used to haul supplies and the less mobile members of the king's court up to the top of the hill and powered by oxen turning a great windlass at the top. After a moment, the Prince Bishop decided to walk the winding avenue up the hill's side. Since having his injury taken care of, he enjoyed the novelty of walking with ease.

The palace guards knew him on sight and waved him through every checkpoint between the main gate and the king's private office. Only then did he stop, knock, and wait to be invited in. Boudain the Tenth sat behind a desk piled so high with papers that Amaury struggled to see him without standing on his tiptoes. The young king seemed to want to directly deal with every matter his father had left to others, and Amaury wondered how long that would last.

“You wish to see me, your Highness?”

The servant who had shown Amaury in slipped out silently, leaving the two men alone in the dimly lit room.

“I do. I received this note by pigeon this morning.” King Boudain scratched his neatly clipped beard as he scanned his desk. He pushed a rolled note toward Amaury before sitting back and waiting.

Amaury unrolled the note, scanning for the general gist rather than reading it. His stomach sank; returning to the beginning, he began to read properly. It irritated him that the king had received word of these events before he had—he maintained a very expensive network of spies and informants to make sure he was always the first person to know what was going on. Now it seemed the new king had managed to make his own intelligence services do some work—for the first time in generations. He had gotten halfway through the note when the king spoke.

“I presume this is our problem made real?”

The paper spoke of a rural hamlet completely reduced to ash. It was described as being “nothing more than a smudge on the ground.” The sheet was stamped at the bottom with a small staff, skull, and sword—the sigil of the Intelligenciers. If nothing else, it was evidence that in his short reign, the king had shown the strength to bring one of his more independently minded hunting dogs under control. If that trend continued, he could become far more difficult to manage than his father was.

“It seems likely,” Amaury said.

“You assured me this wouldn’t become an issue.”

“We’re venturing into the unknown, your Highness. There will always be problems that we cannot foresee.”

“This could become quite a big one. More so if your little secret army is discovered. The people aren’t ready for magic, and you know as well as I do how the citizens of Mirabay respond to things they don’t like.”

It had only been about a year since the last riot, and Amaury remembered it well. A group of rioters had broken into his house on the south bank of the River Vosges and tried to set the place on fire. Amaury believed the riot was an expression of discontent with an ageing and increasingly dissolute ruler. He expected the change of monarch would put to rest that type of behaviour and give him peace for a decade or so—enough time to put his plans in motion. A major upset to the city’s population could change that in a matter of minutes. Nonetheless, he didn’t like the king’s implication. Boudain had known

about the Spurriers since taking the crown, and had been more than happy to have them developing in the background.

“It’s *your* secret army, your Highness. You agreed with me that it was vital to the kingdom’s security. Both the Ostians and the Estranzans are reported to have used mages recently. It will only happen more frequently, and when it does, we do not want to be left behind. *Great foresight and initiative*, I believe you said when we first discussed it. We have access to records that give us a great advantage. We would be fools not to put their contents to use.”

Amaury sat down, forcing the king to move the papers on his desk to maintain eye contact. He wondered if he was taking a liberty. Although he’d known the king most of his life, for most of that time, he had been a prince. When they came into power, Amaury knew, some people got all sorts of foolish notions of having to assert themselves. He had yet to work out if Boudain the Tenth was one such person, but there was only one way to find out.

“In any event,” Amaury said, “I’m sure it won’t come to that. This is only a minor hiccup that will be dealt with in due course. It won’t alter the timeline of our plan. The Spurriers won’t be revealed to the people before they are ready to accept the idea.”

“Minor hiccup?” the king said. “You woke up a damned dragon. A real, fire-breathing, people-killing dragon. It’s already started its rampage. A small rural village we can keep quiet. What happens when it attacks a major town? It’s been so long since one has been seen, I dare say most people don’t even believe they ever existed. Think of the panic it will cause.”

“If it lives, it can be killed, your Highness, and kill it we will. We have the resources at our disposal. It’s only a matter of time.”

The king sat back in his chair. “I’m entitled to be nervous. The first year or so of a new reign is always difficult, and what you are endeavouring to do with the Spurriers will turn a millennium of tradition and law on its head. This . . . could change everything. The first king in centuries to have to deal with a dragon? This could define my reign. It could put a stop to your plans.”

What we are endeavouring to do. Our *plans*, Amaury thought. If things went wrong, he wasn’t going to take the blame alone. King or not, Boudain would share the consequences. If this boy thought he could leave a man like Amaury dangling in the wind when the going got tough, he was sorely mistaken.

“I understand, your Highness, but this is not the time to vacillate. Quite the opposite. We must double our resolve and see it through. If we do, it will

all work as I have planned. To put your mind at ease, I can tell you that I've already taken steps to deal with this. With luck, the next news you have of the dragon will be of its slaughter. In the worst case, we'll lose a few more remote hamlets, and have some old wives' tales and rumours of strange goings on in the countryside to dismiss as being ridiculous. Better still, with a little time to apply my mind to it, I'm sure I can come up with a way to turn it all to our advantage."

Boudain steeped his hands before his mouth, then let out a sigh. "What steps?"

"For the time being, I'd like to keep that to myself. Rest assured, I've consulted the ancient texts in the cathedral library and found a workable solution."

"Some giant, dragon-killing ballista?"

Amaury laughed. "No, your Highness, nothing so crude. I hope you will be pleasantly surprised when I'm in a position to reveal what I'm working on."



Amaury sat in the study of his town palace, overlooking the River Vosges and the twinkling lights of the old citadel on the island that sat at its centre. The Cathedral was hidden behind a packed cluster of buildings, only the tops of its two steeples visible, silhouetted against the stars. The Prince Bishop held an old document, one that could get a lesser man sent to the Intelligenciers' dungeons. It might even be enough to get *him* sent there, should he be caught with it. Although the information it contained was little more than a story, it came from a time when magic had reigned supreme, and was thus considered as illegal as anything could be.

It recounted the early days of the Chevaliers of the Silver Circle. Amaury had wanted to count himself among their number ever since he first heard of them. They had been the doyens of bravery and chivalry in Mirabaya since the days of the Empire, until they were all but extinguished by a bad-tempered, young country nobleman. Admittedly, by that time, little about the Chevaliers held true to their original fame. They were a bunch of arrogant, debauched ingrates who lived off a fat royal pension and spent their days gambling, whoring, and causing trouble. Amaury's ambition to be a Chevalier had been erased the first time he met one.

The Chevaliers originally formed in the later days of the Empire, to deal with a problem largely peculiar to what was then called the Imperial Province

of Mirabensis. Dragons. Although at that time a dragon could be encountered in any mountainous part of the Empire, there seemed to be a higher concentration of them in the peaks in western Mirabensis. The emperor had come to the provincial capital and established the Silver Circle, formed of the bravest bannerets in the Empire. They had already been magically enhanced in any number of ways by the Imperial Magi during their initial training as bannerets, as all bannerets were in those days, but these select few received further boons to equip them to hunt down and slay dragons. They became both mage and swordsman, and over the course of the next few centuries slew every dragon in the Empire. Perhaps every dragon in the world. Except this one, it seemed.

Of course, it might all be legend. The document was irritatingly vague, and ever described things in the most general of ways. Many of the documents the Unified Church had rescued from the burning of the mages' colleges had proven to be fantastical nonsense, and Amaury could easily imagine the arrogant Chevaliers embellishing their reputation. That he heeded the document at all was testimony to how concerned he was. He stood, leaving the parchment on his desk, and walked to the window. He tried to imagine what the citadel would look like with a dragon hovering above, blasting everything with flame, and shuddered. He had no great love for the citizenry, but if Mirabay and all its great buildings were reduced to ash, all he had worked so hard for, all his wealth, power, and influence, would count for nothing.

Returning to his desk, he looked at the document again. Each Chevalier, up to the present day, underwent a secret initiation ritual presided over by the incumbent Chevaliers. They had joked and laughed about it, always hinting at its mystical nature to others, but never elaborating. He thought it unlikely there was still anything magical about the ritual—the Intelligenciers would have dragged the Chevaliers off if there had been. However, as he was learning from the documents and the Spurriers' experiments at the Priory, its headquarters in an old monastery in the north of the city, you didn't necessarily need to know you were doing magic to do it. Words focussed the mind. Intent and desire focussed the mind. A focussed mind shaped magic.

Because of that, somehow, Guillot dal Villerauvais might now be the answer to his country's problem. He was the last surviving Chevalier of the Silver Circle.

He had sent a man to fetch Gill as soon as Commander Leverre had re-

turned with news of the dragon. It had been a knee-jerk reaction and the thought of their shared history gave him some concern. His hip ached when he thought on it. What troubles, he wondered, would Guillot dal Villerauvais bring him this time?