

A depressed dragon, impudent kitten, and frightened young woman make an unlikely trio to save the dragon's swamp and lead humans to wholeness. They need the help of the country's leader, but he ignores animals, fears the dragon, and wants the young woman to be the mother of the heir he so desperately needs. Only a crisis that threatens his country can persuade him to lose his mind, find his heart, and save his people.

Big Dragons Don't Cry

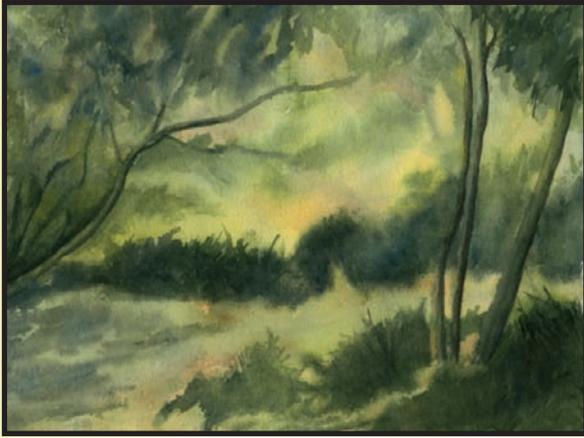
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A Dragon's Guide to Destiny: Book 1

Big Dragons Don't Cry



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First Edition

Chapter 1

The whisper of raindrops awoke Druid. He groaned and covered his ears with his paws. This silenced the dismal dripping, but nothing could prevent him from hearing the call of duty, even when its fulfillment yielded fewer rewards than scratching his scales.

Druid heaved his bulk into a standing position and lumbered from his cave at the bottom of the cliffs that bordered the swamp. He raised his head to the misty sky and recited the ancient water dragon ritual.

"The rains are here. The earth springs alive again. All creatures rejoice, Mother, at the gift of Your tears."

The words settled like dust in Druid's mouth. During the five hundred years humans had occupied the land beyond the swamp, he'd had trouble believing in either the litany or the Mother it honored.

The delicate pattern of life that made the earth whole had begun to deteriorate with their arrival. Both floods and drought had become more common. Refuse choked the rivers, and the grass in the meadows close to human settlements grew pale and sparse. Sometimes Druid wondered if these strange animals survived by sucking the life out of the land.

Today the deterioration seemed to have accelerated, like rot biting deeper into the heart of a tree. Agitation stirred the sluggish waters of Druid's habitual depression. Though humans were probably responsible for this latest disruption, he scanned the swamp to search for a local disturbance: one of the plagues that occasionally swept through the rodent communities or the far more common misbehavior of half-grown wolves.

Nothing seemed changed. As usual, Spanish moss cloaked brooding cypress trees, forming curtains that stretched from tree to

tree and muted the sunlight. The ponds that sprouted blackened tree stumps like decayed teeth remained as stagnant as ever.

The dragon's awareness traveled to other parts of the swamp: the golden seas of saw grass and the dark splendor of the islands that dotted them, the twisted scarlet roots of mangroves belting the area between swamp and sea. He sensed no discord among the creatures who shared this world with him. In a nearby tree, the attention of a hungry hawk was drawn to baby mice who fretted in their mother's absence. Druid heard a cougar's distant growl and the delicate hoof steps of deer. Insects, stirred to life by the rain, buzzed in their billions.

Beyond the boundaries of the swamp lay the human world he'd never seen. Druid called on the pictures that birds had given him of the belching creatures used to stab the earth for growing plants, and the caves of stones and wood filled with bloodless beings that hummed and flashed. Still further to the east stood a place of deadness named City, where life tried to survive with little sun or earth.

In the center of this dead place stood tall caves where humans made plans that threatened other animals. Druid focused his attention there, and the discord burned like a tree struck by lightning. His nostrils filled with the acrid odor of despair.

From the first moment he'd seen them, carrying sticks that spewed out fire no more deadly than the hatred they breathed, he'd known them as enemies. His father's stone-shattering roar had transformed their rage into terror. Physically unharmed, they'd dashed from the swamp, their shriveled hearts swollen with the stuff of nightmares. Only fools and madmen had ever approached the swamp during the following centuries, and the roar Druid had learned from his father had always sent them scurrying back to the safety of their foul cities.

Now the opposite has happened. Their fear feeds their hatred. They approach, the poison of their emotions staining the forest floor. I may finally discover whether my parents told the truth when they said human weapons couldn't penetrate my scales. Why should I believe them? They lied about everything else.

"Druid! The humans come!"

Big Dragons Don't Cry

The screech thrust Druid out of his trance. Tomo, leader of the cougars, bounded down the path to the cave. "They're near the place in the forest where fire took many trees last summer."

Alarm ruffled Druid's scales. "They haven't come that close in a hundred years. Why now?"

"We can talk about why later," Tomo growled. "You've got to drive them out quickly."

Druid, not anxious for an aerobic trot, considered the possibility of a psychic confrontation. As a young water dragon, he'd learned how to transmit an essence of terror so powerful it could make humans believe he stood before them. Now he was so out of practice that he'd probably give himself a sinus headache if he tried, and he'd be laid up for days. Worse, if it didn't work, animals would die. He already heard frightened shrieks that turned his water to steam.

He would have to make a live appearance, but that required exertion. His legs, longer than the length of Tomo's body, could cover a lot of ground, but they had to carry a body weighted down from a long, idle winter of eating kelp.

He wheezed as he followed Tomo back along the trail. "Did you see them?"

"No, a young squirrel, Tolti, brought me the news." The cougar stopped so quickly that the dragon nearly tumbled over him. "She heard them speaking. They said they were going to take water from the swamp."

Druid quivered with an amplified sense of wrongness.

"Dragon, you know this squirrel. Does she have a brain in her tiny head?"

"None of them are empty-headed. Their thoughts travel as quickly as they race up and down trees. Tolti was one of my better students, and she always listened carefully. We can believe her. Did the humans say how they intend to do this?"

"They said only that it would be done, and that the swamp would be theirs."

"It will not." Rage gave Druid speed, and they soon reached the place where the swamp met the woodlands. Other cougars, alligators

and a few eagles waited for them. "I see them," an eagle shrieked. "Their fuzzy heads bob up and down in the distance."

Druid's eyes were not nearly so keen, but he smelled the rank human odor. Fury ennobled him. He rose to his full height, his long neck curving gracefully, his mane streaming in the breeze. Steam poured from his nostrils. He roared, a sound that began at the tip of his long tail, rushed up through his body, and exploded from his mouth in shattering thunder. The humans screamed, and, in a wake of cracking branches, dashed towards the fields.

For long moments the animals waited silently. When the sound of clumsy footsteps disappeared, they shouted, "Hail, Druid! Hail our guardian and protector!"

Druid bowed his head. "It's my job. Now I need to go home and lie down."

"I'll escort you," Tomo said. "Alone," he growled at the squirrels and chipmunks who tried to follow Druid in a ragged victory parade.

Tomo waited until they were out of earshot and then asked, "What would you have done if they'd entered the swamp?"

Druid hissed, spraying the cougar with steam. "Do you speak so to the Keeper? Do you believe I hold my vows lightly? The day humans set foot in the swamp with murder in their hearts and the means of it in their hands will be the last for all of them and their kind."

Tomo's eyes narrowed to amber slits. "The legends are true? You'll summon the fire dragons to destroy the human caves and burn their fields?"

Druid shook his head. "I don't even know where they live. As usual, this lonely dragon will have to take matters into his own paws, but I'd rather humans killed me than know that my cowardice caused one animal die. Face it, if it comes to that, we can be certain the Mother has abandoned us."

"I already have my suspicions on that subject," Tomo growled. "Admit it, so do you. We're on our own."

Big Dragons Don't Cry

"I keep that thought to myself, and I urge you to do the same. Despair can destroy the World more quickly than even the humans."

"Especially the despair of a dragon," Tomo said. "It's heavier than the spring rains."

"I try not to let it show, and when I can teach the young only cynicism, I'll stop. If I have any hope, it's that one of them, a new being, undiscouraged by a world damp with tears of despair, can lead us back to wholeness."

"I'll try to share your hope. In the meantime, what do we do about our knowledge of the humans' plans? I told Tolti to keep her little nutcracker shut, but she may have told half the swamp already. And we don't know who else may have heard the humans."

"Hope it wasn't Gris," Druid said. "That hawk has no discretion. Unless we notice rumors getting out of control, I'd rather wait until we've observed the rain rituals. Let our friends celebrate this expulsion of the humans. It will strengthen them for what may be coming."

"I yield to your wisdom," Tomo said. "And I'll leave you now to contemplate the events of the day."

"Thank you," said Druid, who was tired of contemplation.

So it has come, long after I'd given up hope that the romantic myths spun by that pair of careless drifters called my parents would ever come to pass. Now that I've accepted my peaceful, if boring and more than a little disappointing, life, the disruption arrives that makes my heart quicken with the possibility that they might have told the truth, that I'll yet discover myself as a dragon of destiny.

And probably fail.

On the evening of the rain celebration Druid left his cave to wash himself in the sea. The water spread silken folds over his hide. When he finished washing, he dove to the bottom in search of some particularly succulent varieties of kelp, but after eating a few strands he lost his appetite, for the waving seaweed reminded him of his mother's green mane, of abandonment and eons of loneliness. He shook himself dry and headed for the large island in the center of the swamp, trying to think cheerful thoughts about the glories of spring.

During winter, the dry time, life for most of the animals was a continual search for water and food. Spring and the coming of rain gave rise to one of the most joyful celebrations in the swamp. The newest babies were introduced to the community and helped to find their places in the pattern. It was a time when all animals, in tribute to the end of deprivation, were pledged to disregard traditional predatory relationships.

Meadowlarks flew side by side with eagles, and cougars stretched out in their tawny glory to watch fawns pick their trembling way through the meadow. The animals praised the rain and She who showered abundance on them.

As the sky grew dark and the rains abated, the birds and animals gathered together in a large circle. "Let's have a story," called out a laughing gull.

Tolti, the squirrel, who had found a place on Druid's shoulder, said, "A dragon story."

"Yes, tell us a story, Wise One," a wolf howled.

A story would distract Druid from the concerns that had marred his enjoyment of the celebration. "What story shall I tell?" he asked the assembled animals.

"Tell us of how the dragons and humans became enemies."

"That's a very sad story, and old, older than even me."

Tomo's golden eyes raked him. "Tell it."

Druid sighed. The cougar was right. The celebration was almost over. Tomorrow the animals would have to face possibilities more grim than winter.

"When humans first appeared among us, they didn't know how to do anything," he began. "It looked as if they were going to be a small drop in the pond of history when the animals, in the spirit of She Who Teaches Us All, decided to instruct them."

"The birds and mice and beavers taught them how to build homes."

"The big cats taught them how to hunt," said a cougar.

"No interruptions," someone muttered. "Show respect."

"The fire dragons looked down from the sky at the poor, shivering human beings and decided to give them their special gift of warmth

Big Dragons Don't Cry

and heat. At first, the humans were grateful to the animals, but as they learned these skills, they wanted to forget who had taught them. They wanted to believe themselves above the animals who, out of kindness, had helped them to survive and flourish. They wanted to think they had done it all by themselves."

A young cougar spoke out again. "That's why they hate cats, for our wisdom. We remind humans that there are other intelligent animals around. For that knowledge they try to imprison us. Even now, our small cousins languish, maltreated and dishonored."

"Try being a turtle in a cage," a snapper muttered.

"You're both right," Druid said. "Humans do try to imprison or kill the animals they fear. They attempted to do so with dragons. My fire cousins had taught them how to start fires with wood and stones that burned, but humans found that to be hard work. Some human, may he be cursed, got the idea that it would be easier to trap dragons in order to have a ready source of fire."

Tolti pulled his ear. "May I ask a question?"

"Ask, little one."

"How did the dragons allow themselves to be trapped?"

"They thought it was a game. For a while they were patient, waiting to see how it was played. When they realized that the rules favored the humans, they decided to break them. They melted the prison bars with their fiery breath and flew away.

"Some humans saw the lovely dragons flying in the air and shot at them with fire sticks. Though the weapons couldn't penetrate the dragons' thick scales, this act of hatred ensured that from that time on, dragons and humans would be enemies."

The animals fell silent—all but the frogs and crickets, who sang a melancholy song about the death of trust. As the final chirp died away, Tolti cried, "Mother, protect us from the humans!"

All the animals echoed her words, and the trees whispered supplications to their creator. Tomo slunk gracefully into the center of the circle.

"Druid called his story an old one, but it is no older than a few days ago, when humans nearly breached the sanctity of our home. This is not the worst of it. Tolti, tell the others your story."

Druid would have preferred that the cougar consult with him about the best way to spill the bad news, but that was the problem with being a Keeper. He could protect, negotiate, and mediate, but with a crowd of independent animals, he could never dictate.

"Go ahead, Tolti," he said.

The squirrel clutched Druid's mane as she spoke what she'd heard of the human's plans to take the swamp. Snakes began to hiss, and alligators slapped the water with their tails.

Every animal looked at the dragon. Words never came quickly to him, and he could find no comforting ones now. "We must pray, as Tolti did a short while ago. We must ask Her to protect us and to tell us what we must do to protect ourselves."

His words were as dry of hope as the swamp had been of water. The pattern was being rent, and he, alleged dragon of destiny, stood helpless before its unraveling.

He rose with a wet sigh. "I must go, my friends. It has been a long day."

Tolti remained on his shoulder. "Keeper, your sorrow shudders through me and makes me want to weep."

"Water dragons have that effect. One of our tasks is to arouse the deep and hidden emotions in all living things that they may be brought to the light."

"You arouse love in mine, dear Druid. I don't like to think of you being alone tonight. Let me be with you."

Tears stung Druid's eyes. "You're kind, small one."

"Oh, no," Tolti said as she snuggled into the hollow of his neck. "It's my honor."

Tolti chattered as incessantly as other squirrels. "You can't imagine how shocked I was to hear those humans speaking. Wasn't it good of me to tell Tomo immediately? I was quite frightened to approach him, even though my tail was raised in truce. He ate my cousin only last week. It was all properly done. Her spirit was ready for departure, and the dance was correctly performed. Still, the sight of his teeth wasn't a happy one, I can tell you that. It isn't just the humans, is it?"

Big Dragons Don't Cry

Druid, who had drifted beyond the squirrel's chatter to his own gloomy thoughts, jerked his head up. "What?"

"It's not just the humans, not even just the swamp. Remember how you taught us to hear and feel the earth's rhythm? It's disturbed now."

Druid lifted the squirrel from his shoulder and held her in his paws so that she faced him. "Tell me what's wrong with the rhythm."

The squirrel's nose quivered. "I'm not sure. It doesn't seem to be coming from the ground. It's a feeling from far away, the trembling of wounded animals, but none I've ever known, cries that shiver through me. It's the sound of hearts that have forgotten how to feel."

A young squirrel senses more than I have. Druid clasped Tolti to his heart.

The sky was clear now, and the new moon trailed stars across the sky. Reeds quivered with ghostly beauty, and moonbeams painted the charred tree stumps. Slender pine needles glistened as if they'd been dipped in the silver cauldron of the night.

Tonight the swamp was cloaked in grandeur, and its beauty was bitterness in the dragon's heart as he listened to the reeds and saw grass singing in the faint breeze and heard the distant shriek of a small animal who had surrendered its life.

So the leaves die in autumn, he thought. So they release their hold on the trees who have nurtured them, and fall to the earth to return the gift of life to their hosts. So the seed is food for a rabbit, the rabbit food for the cougar, the cougar food for the seed. It is the way of things that nothing shall be lost or wasted, that we are all important and necessary. Thus the pattern is woven and re-woven.

"How beautiful the World is tonight," Tolti said softly. "Surely the Mother won't permit it to be destroyed."

Do You listen? Druid asked the night. Will you answer this small one's devotion? Perhaps You are more present than I imagine. Perhaps You hide behind the moon, to mock the fumbling creatures who attempt to survive in this world of Your creation, Your laughter as faint as the fading whisper of dragons' wings.

Chapter 2

Orion stood on a ridge overlooking the city. As he swayed, exhausted and hungry, the threads of its winding, dirty streets seemed to tighten around his neck in a noose that limited both breath and freedom.

His sister, Sekhmet, nuzzled him with her black nose. "Lost in thought?"

"Wishing you'd waited a year or so to haul me away from the good life."

"We thought we'd better get on the road before you wore out your equipment, Tomcat Stud Whose Mind Is Stuck in His Testicles."

Orion's other sister, Bast, trotted toward them, her white fur gleaming in starlight. "We've come to the right place. The pull is strong."

"Praise the Many-Taloned One," Sekhmet said. "My paws are killing me."

The lights of the city flickered in eye-burning imitation of the starry sky. "It's not going to be easy," Orion said. "The smell alone makes me gag. It's not just the physical stench, but also the foul odor of self-righteousness and fear. And some of the fear is mine. I've never failed before."

Sekhmet raised her ears. "It's hard to fail when you mount a willing cat. I'm glad you realize you're facing a far bigger challenge. It gives me hope that you've become something more than a swaggering young tom. She of the Rough Tongue is molding you into the cat you were always meant to be."

"I don't know about Her rough tongue, but I've never doubted yours."

Bast growled softly. "Enough. Orion, you have to guide us now."

Panic bristled his fur. "I don't know; I can't feel anything."

Big Dragons Don't Cry

Bast scraped her claws against a flat stone. "Then ask to feel. Have you forgotten you were chosen for more than shining fur and golden eyes?"

"And equipment," Sekhmet said.

He turned his back on them and washed himself briskly to hide his shame. Any cat could find the guidance of the Long-Whiskered One, but Orion's ability to sink into a trance had separated him from the other males of his generation and guided his reluctant paws to this cold, windy, hilltop. How could he forget the first lesson all kittens learned? When you got lost, She would always nudge you home.

Orion closed his eyes and began to meditate on golden fur and eyes. The rasp of Her tongue shivered through him, massaging away the tension that had tightened his limbs, clearing away the resistance and fear that had hidden his path, and even temporarily blurring the memory of well-fed, sleek females.

The way became clear, but one final moment of doubt kept him in place. "Are humans worth our sacrifice?"

"Not yet, they aren't," Bast said, "but we're weaving a dream."

Orion loped down the hill, praying that the gathering strands wouldn't knot into a noose.

* * *

Emerald rubbed against the rough wood of the grain warehouse floor, howling in agony.

"If you keep carrying on like that, every tom in the city is going to knock at the door," Misha said.

"You talk as if it never happened to you, old lady. You know some magic to scratch the itch, tell me."

"No magic, child. It's a queen's way to want kittens and a tom's way to know when she wants them. Neither of them looks at the big picture. That's why this city is filled with half-starved cats too weak to run away from humans."

Emerald shuddered. Her mother, Hester, had been one of the victims, taken away with Emerald's littermates. "Could have been me."

"Could have been. If you hadn't been such a mischief-maker, climbing to the top sack of grain that terrible night, you wouldn't be flicking your tail and shuffling your hind legs right now. You want your own kittens to be drowned or tortured? That why you want to bring them into this sorry slum? The world is cruel to a cat and her kittens, except in the Green."

Fur and whiskers, Misha would pounce on any excuse to trot out that old catnip fantasy handed down from mother to daughter, but the soft hum that filled her voice soothed Emerald.

"Tell me about the Green, might take my mind off this awful itch, pass the time, anyway."

Misha closed her eyes and slowly rocked back and forth. "Somewhere, maybe not far away, might be over the next hill if we could only climb it, is a world where everything's green, bright and beautiful as your own eyes."

Though Emerald tried to imagine that, she saw instead the pale, sickly stalks of grass that grew up through the cracks in the sidewalk and the pointed dark green leaves with yellow flowers that turned to white fur. Green everywhere? Not likely.

"And fat, tasty mice that eat fresh seeds and grains, and more kinds of birds than you could count, and never a hungry moment."

"No humans?"

"Maybe some, but the Green is so big you can get away from them easy. And they got their own business to be going about. They got no time for idle viciousness."

Emerald sighed, the itch beginning to subside. "Tell me more about what it looks like."

"Flowers, not in some tiny window box or fenced-off piece of earth, but growing everywhere and smelling nice. The ground is soft on your paws, and a breeze always ruffles your fur and makes it clean. The Green has big, tall trees whose branches touch the sky. It's quiet there: no cars and trucks and footsteps all the time day and night, just the wind blowing through the leaves to sing you to sleep."

Emerald felt her tortured body begin to relax as waves of sleep rocked it. No way Green could come out of this hard, concrete world, but it was a comforting dream.

Big Dragons Don't Cry

When she woke up, she caught a mouse and drank some water from the basin the humans used. She wished they'd drive their truck in to unload sacks of grain. Misha always saved a few mouse carcasses for their arrival, lining them up by the door. They would say, "Good kitties" and pour some milk into a bowl.

Emerald wanted the cool wetness of milk. The desire flickering inside her awakened the deeper urge, and she started to twitch and feel crazy again. As she dragged across the floor she heard a body thump onto the top layer of bags.

"Girl, you're giving off a sweet perfume," a deep voice purred, "and I've got what you need."

"She doesn't need anything but to be left alone," Misha growled. "You hightail it out of here."

"Are you the chaperone, Grandma? Better go hide behind the pile of bags before you see something that might make you remember better times – though you never had anycat as good as Senti."

"Good? You got some delusions. Try being on the receiving end of all those barbs tearing a poor girl to shreds. Don't be talking about a tom's style, because they don't have any. You listening to me, Emerald? You think you're hurting now? You haven't come to the beginning of pain."

"Misha's old and dried up," Senti said, hopping down to the floor. "You listen to me, Emerald; I'm going to take you out of your misery."

Misha leapt between them. "This girl is too young and too small to be having kittens. She could lose the litter and maybe her own life. You want to be responsible for that?"

Senti paused to consider. "Responsibility and tomcat are two words that hardly ever shake paws. Don't try to talk decency to me when my hormones are jumping. Don't try to stand in the way, either."

* * *

"I don't like the looks of this neighborhood," Bast said, flicking gobs of mud off her white paws.

Sekhmet curled her lip. "Did you expect to find the Chosen's mother in a nice, clean parlor, lapping daintily at a plate of gourmet

food? The Prophecy said that though her heritage is royal, her circumstances would be lowly. In a place like this, you find cats with backbone."

"And dirty paws." Bast flicked again.

Orion sniffed. The scent grew stronger with every paw step—not just the delicious aroma of a female in heat, but, oddly, the fragrance of white-throated flowers and fat mice and earth bursting with life. He quickened his pace when he saw the warehouse.

"Go up those metal steps; they lead to an open window," he said.

"We'll let you introduce yourself first," Sekhmet said.

Orion stood on the window ledge and watched an elderly cat hiss at a white tom.

"You'll have to come past me, Senti. You want it bad enough to kill for it?"

Orion took advantage of the tom's hesitation to vault through the window. He saw the thin alley cat crouched in the corner. The contrast between her scrawniness and the padded hips of the females whose shining fur he'd recently been rubbing depressed him. Royalty rarely masqueraded as a bag of bones.

He changed his mind when she looked up. "You here to join in the fun?" she spat. The green fire in her eyes flashed through Orion, awakening something deeper than lust. It aroused the all-pervasive glow that filled him when the Mother wrapped Her shining warmth around him. He longed for this skinny queen, as he had never desired a female. His tongue burned with the urge to lick her dusty fur until it gleamed. He wanted to see her sides swell with his kittens, watch them tumble into life, and help them grow.

These alien thoughts told him that, whether or not he killed his rival in a mating battle, his careless youth would die, and that would only be the beginning of the changes. His mission would demand far more from him than he'd ever given to anything. He was tempted to back out of the warehouse and run back to freedom, but Bast and Sekhmet were behind him, hissing for him to get on with it.

Long-tailed One, guide me, he prayed.

This is the easy part. Wait until you really need to ask Me for guidance. Now you're on your own.

Big Dragons Don't Cry

Orion narrowed his eyes and surveyed the scene, considering the obstacles. He leapt on top of the piled bags and growled at the tom. "Get away from her."

Senti hissed. "Don't know who you are, but this isn't your turf. Go find your own mate."

Orion hopped down lightly to the floor. "The elder appealed to your sense of common decency. That didn't work."

"Damn right, because you know as well as I do that a tomcat has no morality. You're not going to jump her bones if you get the chance?"

That, of course, was exactly what Orion planned to do, and he wanted to get rid of the other tom with a minimum of violence. He tried to give him an easy out. "I would prefer not to cause you harm, and I must warn you that I've never been defeated in a mating battle."

"There's a first time for everything, big-talking foreigner." The white cat began to puff up, hissing slowly.

Orion bared his teeth, and his inflated tail twitched back and forth. Senti was readying himself for a pounce when Orion leapt at his throat.

Senti, more agile than Orion would have suspected, twisted out of range and countercharged. Orion slashed at the other cat and leapt again. This time, using a zigzag pattern he'd perfected, he changed directions in mid-air and landed beyond Senti. Before the other cat could whirl around, Orion, in a parody of the mating position, gripped the nape of his neck, and pressed him against the floor.

The young female gasped. "Don't kill him."

Bast and Sekhmet appeared at the top of the bags. "It would be better if the Chosen's journey doesn't begin in a pool of blood," Bast said.

"It certainly won't be as messy," Sekhmet said. "Beat it," she told Senti. "You've gotten off easy."

Orion released the white cat, who looked at him with dignity. "Nice leap. I'll have to practice it." He darted up to the open window and left.

Sekhmet turned her attention to the young queen. "Are you sure she's the one? She's awfully skinny."

The cat arched her back and hissed. "So would you be if you lived on the thin pickings here. Who are you, to be coming in here with this attitude?"

Bast nodded. "Well spoken. Sekhmet, you've got to admit she has a proud bearing and plenty of spirit. You said this place would breed cats with backbone."

"That doesn't mean I want to see a cat whose backbone is practically sticking out of her skin. She needs to have more flesh if she's going to have healthy kittens."

The young female spat at them, her eyes fiery green. "Since when does a tom bring a selection committee with him?"

As the adrenaline of battle mode drained from Orion, fierce desire reappeared. Why didn't all these hissing females go off and hunt for mice? His plan had been sex first, explanations afterwards.

The old female bared worn teeth. "Answer Emerald's question. Who are you?"

"Emerald, is it?" Sekhmet said. "Lovely name and quite fitting, but if you want healthy kittens, like any queen, you're in the wrong place. The Chosen could have a better start than this place."

Her glance took in the grain and mouse droppings spilled on the floor, the black mold on one wall from a leak, the dust, the grime, and the dim red flash of rats' eyes.

Misha snarled. "Don't you dare slink in here like you own the world and trash the place where I've been living for years. Got a roof, doesn't it? Plenty of mice, too. Do you have anything better where you come from? Don't have to tell me you're foreigners, although you're the first fancy-assed cats who ever tried to bullshit me with stories about the Chosen. What's your scam? Are you passing yourselves off as the messengers of the Prophecy?"

Orion and his sisters looked at each other. Familiarity with the Prophecy virtually guaranteed that these alley cats, despite their unlikely appearance, had royal blood.

"No pretense involved," he said. "That's who we are."

Misha yawned. "Right, and I'm the High Priestess of the Alley."

Big Dragons Don't Cry

Sekhmet looked ready to talon the old cat, but Bast shoved her. "Forgive us, Elder. We've had a long journey, and rest will restore our manners. Since you've mentioned the prophecy, I'd be honored to hear what you know of it."

Misha raised her head with dignity. "I'll tell you the story, as long as you don't say I'm an ignorant alley cat for getting it all wrong."

Bast flicked her tail at Sekhmet. "We'll listen to your words with respect."

"All right. My ancestors, who chose to travel with the first humans who came here, taught that when cats are as low down on their haunches as they can be, a kitten will be born of the royal line—and that's me and Emerald, whether you believe it or not—who'll teach them to be proud of themselves. Depending on how things go, she'll either teach the humans to respect us or have them wiped out."

"We lean towards the first solution," Sekhmet said, "but we're flexible."

She padded toward Misha and touched noses with her. "I regret that we started off on the wrong paw. Let's begin again. We, too, are of the ancient royal line. Bast, my sister, and I, Sekhmet, are the Seekers. With Orion, our brother, we've been traveling for weeks, looking for the one who will give birth to the Chosen. Orion's role in the Prophecy should be obvious."

"I'm not just the stud," he growled.

Misha looked back and forth between him and Emerald. "Am I hearing this right? Are you saying that Emerald is part of the plan?"

Sekhmet nodded. "According to Not-Just-the-Stud, she's the one we've been seeking."

* * *

They all stared at Emerald. She lifted her dragging butt and hissed at them. "Is this your idea of a joke? Is this like the human saying, 'Nice kitty,' and then starting a torture trip? Because if you're telling me that an alley cat who's never been more than two blocks from this warehouse is part of some damn Prophecy, you're seriously messed up."

Orion turned the full strength of his gaze on her, and she was ready to take back everything she'd said. The sight of him took her

over the top, transforming raw desire into a hunger she'd never known. She wanted to rub her cheek against his gleaming, striped fur. She longed for his teeth to bite into the nape of her neck and to feel his lean, muscular weight pinning her down.

If he were part of the story she'd stay tuned in a little longer.

"You never told her?" Bast asked Misha.

"We have to get along with our neighbors," she said. "A cat who sets herself above the rest doesn't get along too well. A mother will tell her kittens when they're grown, so that they'll be prepared if the Prophecy unfolds within their lifetimes. I was close to telling Emerald. I should have. She never would have let Senti near her."

"But you were ready to fight to save her," Orion said. "That shows breeding."

She hissed at him. "That's what anycat would do to save the life of one too young for kittens. I'll fight you, too, royal or not."

"No need," Sekhmet said. "We all want to see Emerald in better health before she has kittens."

Bast interrupted her. "Speaking of health, I'm getting a little hungry, so let's wrap up this story. Misha, I don't know how many details of the Prophecy came to this place with your ancestors, but it arrived in stages. First Ra the Dreamer received the vision that cats would restore all creatures to their connection with the Golden-Eyed One. Bast, my namesake, envisioned the crisis and chaos that would precede this reunion. Heket predicted that our line would produce the father of the Chosen. Heket's descendant, our own mother, Hathor, dreamt that Orion would be that one. Though we don't often like to tell him so, his attributes are the finest of any male of his generation."

Don't have to tell me about attributes, Emerald thought in that small fragment of her mind that wasn't screaming with wanting him. She would have let Senti have her, not because he was the sharpest talon on the paw, but because he was there and she was desperate.

But this one would make strong, healthy kittens. His fur would be soft and silky to the touch. Emerald shivered.

"And the Green, what about the Green?" Misha demanded. "Did you hear that, Emerald? Thought I was out of my head, didn't you?"

Big Dragons Don't Cry

They all were psycho, and Emerald wished they'd leave the warehouse to continue their ranting so she could get it on with this hunk of cat. She yowled faintly to remind him why he was here.

Though his eyes burned with longing, he shook his head. "My sisters and your grandmother are right. The Chosen must have a healthy, well-fed mother. We need to get to the Green first."

"And there's a lot of Green in the world," Sekhmet said. "We need to find the right piece of it. She closed her golden eyes. After a long silence, she said. "We continue west, at least a day's journey by paw. We seek a place beyond great fields of wheat and other plants, a forest with streams and ferns and small, delicious creatures who quiver at the thought of our talons."

The white cat sniffed at a bag of grain. "Sekhmet, smell this."

She padded over and nosed it. "Yes, the smell matches my vision: Green and wheat, well-fed country mice. Where did this bag come from, Elder?"

"A truck," Misha said. "Every day the trucks come, and humans unload the bags."

"Have they come yet today?" Bast asked.

"Not yet."

The black and white cats looked at each other and started to purr. "Who says there are no free rides?" Sekhmet said. "We've hitchhiked hundreds of human miles in their vehicles. Once the truck that comes here is unloaded, we'll hop in when they're not looking and go out to these fields."

Go penetrated the thick haze that spiderwebbed Emerald's brain. This wasn't some sick, heat-induced dream. If she agreed, she'd be heading off into the unknown with a trio of crazy cats who thought they were hot shit and she was some deluxe breeding machine.

She looked around the warehouse. The black bitch was right; it was a dump. She would never have a better chance to leave, and who was she kidding? She'd follow Orion's striped haunches anywhere. But what about Misha? Who would catch mice for her; who would groom her?

And who, to get down to the unsheathed claws of the matter, would love Emerald? Not this pack of strangers.

"Misha comes with me," she said.

Sekhmet sniffed. "She's old; she'll slow us down. And the Prophecy says nothing about her."

"Then screw the Prophecy." Emerald moved next to Misha and leaned against her trembling body. "You honor her as a cat of great faith and royalty. She gives you the clue about where to go next. You want to dump her? Forget it."

Orion raised a paw. "Misha comes with us. Remember? We're flexible."

A few hours later, they all jounced about in an empty truck, an experience that made Emerald forget about even the faintest pulse of desire.

"If we all crouch together in the corner, we'll be jolted less," Bast said. So Emerald found herself between the white cat and Sekhmet, both of whom, she was forced to admit, smelled very clean and made her nose sting with her own stench.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"It is unpleasant, but you can't help it," Bast said. "Wait until you're running through fields of grass and sleeping on soft pine needles and eating good food."

"Really?" she murmured and closed her eyes.

Emerald didn't fall asleep, though, and she heard the two talk about her.

"Anything in the Prophecy about a crude little guttersnipe?" Sekhmet, of course.

"Like you said, we had no reason to expect a princess, and this female is tough, strong, and, despite her circumstances, proud. She's also loyal and compassionate. She'll make a magnificent mother," Bast said.

"You're right, but I hope we can knock some manners into her."

No chance, Emerald thought before she fell asleep.

Chapter 3

Phileas Ar'ran braced himself for one of the most odious tasks required of the Guardian of Oasis: sex.

The young woman lying beneath him might have been dead for all the interest she showed in his attempts to arouse her. Probably she'd taken one of the drugs the young used to dull emotions. Perhaps the atmosphere of the Conception Chamber, a room in the House of Healing with all the charm of a morgue, had an equally numbing effect. With a carefully stifled sigh, he began the business of the moment.

Overall, he preferred indifference to the fear some young women displayed at being in the presence of the Guardian, the greatest man in the country. Even fear was better than the calculating attitude of those who thought seductiveness might earn them more than a brief stint in his bed. Foolish girls, didn't they realize he read their thoughts and feelings as easily as others read a printed page or computer screen?

He didn't blame any of them: the indifferent, the fearful, and the schemers. Why expect passion from them when he felt none?

Phileas completed the tedious act, hoping, as he always did, that the right combination of genes would produce his heir, so that he could be done with these charades.

As she'd been instructed, the girl lay quietly for five minutes to keep the seed from spilling (no hardship, since she'd been lying quietly the whole time). She glanced at the clock. "Can I go?"

"You may."

Failing to notice the grammatical correction, she flung on her indigo tunic and trousers. *Not even a shower first*, Phileas thought with distaste. Once the blood of Zena and Nathan, the Etreznians who had founded Oasis, had run true. Either the caliber of their female descendants had fallen sharply in recent years, or the selection

committee was ignoring the need to provide candidates with sensing abilities. This one didn't even recognize her odor.

"Is this the last time?" the slattern asked.

"Yes. Tomorrow, a Healer will test to see whether you've conceived." The odds were against that. Though Phileas's sperm had been declared in fighting condition, they avoided collision with eggs—and wisely so, when you considered the quality of mothers he was offered. No children had been born of these lackluster unions.

The girl pinned her hair into a sloppy knot. "Well, then . . ."

"We will hope for good news."

"Yeah."

She exited through the door without a backward glance.

Phileas reflected that she certainly had sufficient emotional control.

He stepped into the shower to wash off both the residue of sex and the film of gathering despair. Every brain cell must be sparking so that he could deal with the batch of morons and malcontents who made up the National Council.

In the past, Janzi Nor'azzi had helped him keep order, but during the last week she'd succumbed to some unknown sickness. What better indication of a nation in decline than a mysteriously ill Chief Healer?

Who happened to be his mother.

Phileas towed off, gave his close-cropped graying hair an impatient swipe, and put on his dark purple robe. Before he left the room, he reminded himself to be calm and patient—at least for the first five minutes. If he could manage serenity for any longer, it would be a miracle, for today's council meeting was the quarterly State of Society discussion, and the state of society could hardly be worse.

The membership of the tree-hugging Earther cult continued to grow. Their opposition, the self-flagellating Godlies, persisted in warning anyone who'd listen (and many who didn't) that all sins of the flesh would result in an eternal afterlife of fleeing the fire-

Big Dragons Don't Cry

breathing dragon. The rest of the Oasan population teetered between confusion and apathy. What had extinguished the spirit of a once-vibrant nation devoted to the power of mind over body? Phileas knew he wouldn't find the answer to that key question at the Council meeting.

The Council met in a modern, solar-powered building with a pyramid on its top. The pyramid was intended to draw down pure mind. Unfortunately, Phileas couldn't remember a meeting where it had worked.

Three Councilors were missing: The Chief Healer, the Councilor for Education, and the Councilor for the Arts. The latter two were Tamarans, and each had requested a leave of absence from Council meetings, claiming that their duties left no time for attendance.

Phileas was certain that the top educator, a well-known lecher, was busy attending high school and university assemblies that featured performances by nubile young girls. As for the arts, countless opportunities existed to avoid boring Council meetings: the need, for example, to determine whether a movie was too pornographic for public viewing.

Tamarans were uncommonly clever at cloaking their desire for sensual pleasures in the guise of official business. Since these members contributed little to serious discussions, Phileas intended to ignore their absences unless the Tamaran community made noises about being unrepresented.

Kermit Strand, State Treasurer, gave the first report. In comparison to the Tamaran Council members, he was a paragon of mental control. If he had any emotions, they'd long since withered from neglect. His worst crime was the delivery of mind-numbing financial reports.

"The people are resisting our traditional and sacred austerity. They demand material comforts; they teeter on the verge of demanding satisfaction of their sensual urges. I attribute this rise in unrest to the increase in visits to Tamaras, which in the last quarter have doubled."

"You can attribute anything bad to Tamaras," Daria Turley, Nathan's feeble-minded descendant, muttered. "Oasis exists because

Zena and Nathan had the wisdom and courage to rise up against the rotten nature of Tamaras, sin central."

"According to the surveys run by my department," Kermit said, "forty percent of the people don't even want to admit they're descended from slaves of the Tamaran overlords. They say their ancestors came later. Now that the vast wealth from Tamaran mining industry is more equitably distributed, their average family income is 17,000 tams, nearly double the equivalent in nats."

"But do they have subsidized housing and grain, free food and free medical care, and the best schools in the known world?" Daria shouted.

"They have disposable income. They eat fatty meat. They drink grain alcohol. They have theatres that show the worst kind of filth. Tam Town alone has twenty-three theatres, and attendance has risen thirty-four percent in the last year. Five recording companies spew out acoustic drivel to the tune of hundreds of millions of copies."

"And what do our people want?" Phileas asked.

"Twenty-five percent increase in income. That's an average, calculated with the following elements factored in—"

"A summary will do."

Kermit dropped his papers. "More money, release of trade and travel restrictions, abandonment of censorship."

"Surely not all Oasans?"

"A growing number, enough to cause unrest, and the rise is statistically greater among youth. In an anonymous survey, fifty percent of the respondents said they've considered emigration—to Tamaras, of course. Few showed any interest in the frozen peaks of Dolocairn or the Etrezian desert. They seek the flesh pots."

"We have failed," Daria said.

Phileas knew what she really meant. *He* had failed. The founders' pristine dream of a people no longer enslaved by the addictive demands of the body, no longer drowned in the tidal pool of emotions, free to create a peaceful and just society by using the possibilities of pure mind, had eroded under his leadership.

And Snurf Noswan, the Godly who had somehow prayed his way onto the Board, was about to tell him why.

"With all due respect, Guardian, your relaxation of sexual restrictions has only made the people more dissatisfied. As Zena so rightly said, lust is an addiction that can never be satisfied."

"I couldn't agree more," Phileas said. "The same might be said of gluttony, but does that mean we should ban eating? By providing free, tasteless nutrition, we restore eating to its rightful role as a physical function. We encourage the same attitude towards sex. Old Tamaras had more rules against sex than Oasis has ever had. Depravity flourished in an underground and illicit atmosphere. Repression from above pushed perversion below."

"Filthy Tamarans," Daria said.

She might not have said it if the Tamaran Council members had been present, but her opinions could get back to them. Phileas moved quickly to avoid a later crisis. "Remember Nathan said our greatest strength came from the blending of the races to create a new culture."

"Except that we're not doing much blending," Wendly Icinger said. "In my capacity as Director of Agriculture, I get countless complaints from Dolocairners that they're automatically assigned to the fields. Is it any wonder they become Earthers?"

And what about you, Wendly? Phileas wondered. *Do you, too, fall on your knees at the name of the Earth Mother and beg forgiveness for your crimes against twigs and weeds?* He didn't read that kind of devotion in the man, but Wendly's being shouted sympathy. And why not? He was a Dolocairner.

"Don't forget the ones who become Godlies," said Snurf, a Dolocairner who led the Godlies.

They were both right, but every attempt Phileas had proposed for the elevation of the Dolocairn race had been stifled by his fellow Etreznians, who produced studies showing that Dolocairners lacked the ability to make fine mental distinctions. Now the country had two dissident Dolocairn-led movements, one based on wild and irrational Earth worship and the other on the fierce eradication of all emotions but penitence, suffering, and stifling self-righteousness.

Kermit shuffled papers. "Back to business. We were talking about sex."

Phileas nodded with relief. "It's incorrect to say that deviance goes unpunished. Those who persist in it fail to advance in our society for the simple reason that they've demonstrated a lack of control over their physical urges. We levy the same penalties on those who are emotionally uncontrolled. The man who can't refrain from showing public affection to his wife—"

"Or the depraved teenagers who practically have sex in the street," Daria said.

"Yes, those, too. They pay for their pleasures, just as do the drug abusers, by being deprived of any significant role in the shaping of their country. Thus, they are isolated, and Oasis is uncorrupted. Those who change their minds and decide to learn mental and emotional discipline can re-enter the mainstream of society."

"But without having to atone," Snurf said. "The Godlies do not accept that. Those who contribute to an atmosphere of licentiousness make it more difficult for the ones who seek purity of mind and body. The sinners should be punished."

"A spirit of vengeance is emotional extravagance unworthy of Mind," Phileas said. "Let's hear some facts, instead." He turned to Kermit. "Isn't it true that since the relaxation of the sex laws we have greatly reduced incidents of rape and murder?"

"I can verify that." Kermit tapped on his handheld computer. "Rape down seventy-five percent, murder fifty percent. Excellent statistics."

"And I'd rather have live and unbrutalized citizens. In this, I follow the example of my father, Calmus Ar'ran, Guardian before me, who said that law was no substitute for reasoning with the people."

"We all know that," Malvern Frost said, "but I'd like to know how he'd deal with the Earthers. Agitation increases among the field workers. Earthers spout the nonsense that they've heard the earth cry out. They claim that abuse of the land will lead to our doom. Many are now bleating that we must become one with it. Imagine that, becoming one with mud and dung and mindless animals who eat and shit and call that life. They're actively recruiting young Oasans.

Big Dragons Don't Cry

On three occasions, they've demonstrated in the center of Nathansville."

As annoying as the other Councilors could be, Phileas considered only Malvern dangerous. Half Dolocairner and half Etreznian, he could shift identities to his advantage, at one moment expressing his solidarity with those who felt their ways through life and the next displaying all the attributes of a formidable, emotionless mind. Lately Phileas had sensed in him an overarching ambition, and today Malvern seemed far too pleased about Kermit's gloomy report.

Wendly's brow furrowed like a newly ploughed field. "I'm seeing too many good men and women turn to the Earther cult—not the kind of people who weep at the death of a sparrow, but honest, intelligent citizens. We should be listening and seeing if there's any way of finding common cause, instead of driving them underground."

Phileas nodded. "Exactly as Calmus said. Let's never forget that the philosophy of Oasis is based on the free exchange and enrichment of thought."

Malvern pounded the table. "But as you said, Guardian, it's not based on emotional extravagance. I defy anyone to make common cause with the idea that the earth can speak. Show me one passage in Nathan's writing that even suggests such twaddle. Earthism is a disease, a fungus, a rot, and it will destroy our food production like any disease. There's already huge disruption, as I have reason to know, living in Oasis West, cheek by jowl with the farmers."

Phileas suppressed a smirk. Cheek by jowl, indeed. Malvern had plenty of both. Through some act of administrative chicanery, he'd built a house on one of the few hills in Oasis West, claiming it was necessary to have an overview of the fields. Oddly, this house also needed to be larger than a typical farmer's dwelling, and the interior was, if not luxurious in the decadent style of Tamaras, no monument to austerity. This way of living could provoke the people to greater unrest.

"We aren't doing nearly enough," Snurf said, "but, as I continually state, only in the Godly sect are all equal."

"A sect Nathan would never have permitted," Daria said.

"Untrue! Unfair! And among the Godlies you won't find the greed, the jealousy, or the unleashed lust that poisons the rest of the population. We practice Nathan's creed of austerity in every aspect of our lives."

Phileas thought someone should feed Daria to the dragon, but she was tough to quash. "These Godly notions of sin and repentance undermine our ideals," she said, "and some of these fanatics standing on the street corners have no more emotional control than the worst of the Earthers. It's what you could expect of people whose ancestors froze their bollocks off every winter—and we all know how long a Dolocairn winter lasts."

Unfortunately, Daria was right about that. The elements were so harsh in Dolocairn that those who held an unquenchable racial memory of its severity imagined a world in which sinners froze in an icy pit.

Phileas looked in despair at the Council members. They could only agree about how bad things were. It was up to him to spin some notion to promote unity.

"Councilors, we need renewal. We've already planned the celebrations for the five-hundredth anniversary of Nathansville, but we'd better fine-tune them. I recommend encouraging those who'll make speeches to emphasize unity more than ever and the idea that every citizen is important. I'd also recommend a particularly heavy emphasis on what the days of slavery were like, and I'd like to see a high percentage of Dolocairners participating in the performances."

He turned to Snurf. "I stand in total opposition to the Godly idea that people will only turn away from emotional extravagance if they live in terror of an afterlife of being chased by the dragon. However, I favor reminding people what happens when they throw reason and logic out the window. As the fine play, *Zena Triumphant*, reminds us, emotional slavery can be as much a form of bondage as physical servitude. Let's inspire renewed vigilance."

He looked around the table. "Are we in accord?"

"Well spoken, Guardian," Kermit said. "If we all do our part, I should end up with more encouraging numbers to crunch."

Big Dragons Don't Cry

"I'm always in favor of reminding people about the bad old days," Daria said. "Oasis rose from the ashes of decadence."

The others nodded. "Good," Phileas said. "By next week I'll expect plans to raise enthusiasm among the field workers, students, special interest groups, and general population."

He looked at the printed agenda. "What's this item: Dragon?"

"That's mine," Malvern said, "and it's critical. Last night I heard that the dragon was seen entering the fields. Some brave men fought it back into the swamp."

Godlies, Earthers, and now the dragon? "Why was I not told immediately?"

"Because I'm still attempting to verify the information. No need to throw the population into panic."

That might be exactly what Malvern wanted to do. "This is a very serious matter. Except for the occasional drunken idiot, no one has seen the dragon since the arrival of the first settlers."

"Some people even wonder if it's still alive," Wendly said. "Only the youngest children still play the Dragon game."

"Another example of the decline in morals," said Snurf. "Unless we have the dragon to remind me what beasts we can become without the discipline of Mind, we will fail as a nation. Consider how Dolocairn long ago lost itself to dragon worship. Do we want a country poor in material goods, starving for intellect, rich only in the murk of emotion?"

"We all know dragon worship ruined Dolocairn," Malvern said. "And every smart Dolocairner in Oasis has learned to distance himself from that disaster of a country. *We* know that every dragon is our enemy, but let's pay attention to the monster in the swamp."

Phileas wished Malvern weren't so articulate. It made him more dangerous. "Let's get down to specifics," he said. "We must try to determine why the dragon appeared. Everyone who saw it is ordered to report to the Healing Center immediately, while their impressions are fresh."

"If you wish it, Guardian," Malvern said, his deference thin.

"I do wish it."

Pounding at the door interrupted him. "Enter."

A young woman dressed in the green tunic and trousers of an apprentice Healer ran into the room. "Assistant Chief Healer Romala Kyle needs you. We have an emergency."

"This meeting is adjourned," Phileas said. "We will meet again in a week."

He shoved his chair aside and left the room.

Phileas walked quickly from the administrative complex to the Healing Center. Two Healers leaped to attention when he entered the lobby. "Healer Kyle awaits you in Room S2 on the top floor."

Phileas breathed deeply to quell the small pulse of anxiety in his throat. That was his mother's room.

Though impatience was a dangerous failing, he couldn't wait for the elevator and vaulted up the stairs, past the surgery suite, the mental mastery training floor, and the wards for those who were suffering only a slight reversal in their mental fortunes. He opened the door to Room S2 and closed it quickly behind him.

Romala Kyle, an ordinarily composed woman with strong features, stood by Janzi's bed, looking as if she'd witnessed the front line of a Tamaran invasion. Nonetheless, her manners were impeccable.

"Guardian, I apologize for interrupting your meeting."

"No apologies required. Your damage control has been superb. Did the Chief Healer take a turn for the worse?"

Romala summoned him closer. "This morning, when I attended her, she was highly agitated, squeezing her fingers together, occasionally bursting into tears."

"Tears? My mother?"

"You can imagine my shock. She asked me if I knew that the dragon was our friend."

"*Our friend?* You're certain these were her words."

She nodded, her black eyes steady. "She repeated them several times. She also claimed that we must honor and express our emotions."

Phileas fought the temptation to fall onto the floor and collapse. "And from whence did this astonishing information come?"

"She wouldn't tell me, but she said it was documented."

I am the Guardian. The future of a nation depends on my self-control. I will not fail. Phileas pulled a chair beside the Chief Healer's bed, shaking her gently awake.

Janzi's black eyes snapped open. "Phileas, I'm so glad you're here. I have vital news."

"So I've heard."

"We must change all our policies immediately. Oasis will finally be free. We can shake off the bondage of fear and the tyranny of mind control. We will at last come into balance."

"This is wonderful news. How did you discover it?"

"Just before I fell ill, I was looking for a book on healing I wanted to have entered into the public database. Through an accident—though logic admits to no accidents—I found a hiding place that held an ancient, dusty manuscript. It was Zena's last testament. What I read created such turmoil that illness took advantage of my imbalance, but a period of rest has refreshed and revitalized me."

"Oasis rejoices," Phileas said. "I would like to see the manuscript that brought you such happiness."

Janzi smiled. "I'm afraid that won't be possible. Zena used a binding spell she learned from her witch grandmother to prevent anyone who wasn't ready for her words from finding it. It remains in its hiding place, awaiting your belief. Hopefully, I've planted a seed that will flower into faith."

"Having read the ancient texts about Etrezian witchcraft, I'm aware binding spells can be broken," Phileas said.

A crafty look came over the old woman's face. "It would be demeaning for a Guardian to dabble in witchcraft."

"I will suffer that or any humiliation for the sake of our country. Is it not the work of the Guardian to decide what should be hidden and what should not?"

"Zena thought you'd say that, not that she knew who you were, nothing personal. She referred to the Guardian. Why struggle with spells and useless searches? If you're meant to find the manuscript, you will, and Oasis will learn the truth."

The Chief Healer, who, after Phileas, was supposed to be the most mentally disciplined person in Oasis, began to weep. "How wrong we've been. It's unbearable to contemplate. And the dragon, the poor dragon."

Phileas quickly shielded himself against both her obvious insanity and the fatal temptation towards sympathy. Here was the great danger of being a Healer. One needed to sense the emotions of others, but the shields against absorbing them had to be vigilantly maintained. Janzi had obviously neglected her shielding to the point where her mind was probably a quagmire.

He would soon need to find out, but he decided to first see how much reason remained to her. "Does Zena mention the dragon?"

For a moment, Janzi's eyes flashed with intelligence. "Don't think you can trick me. It follows logically. We must love the earth, Phileas, and the dragon is part of the earth."

She burst into fresh tears.

"Janzi, your state of emotional agitation must be painful to you. Will you allow us to enter your mind for healing?"

"I made no attempt before," Romala said. "I felt a solo effort might be dangerous, and I could trust none but you to join me."

"Quite right." The woman's reasoning and discretion were flawless. This was a priceless gift, since the need for a new Chief Healer was now urgent. "You won't be offended if I take the primary role here?"

"Not at all, but I do have a suggestion. I don't wish to offend you, but this will be a delicate probe for you, as the subject is your mother, who's in a highly agitated state."

"I never felt better," Janzi said.

Phileas winced at the word, "felt." "Healer Kyle, if you're suggesting that we link minds, I would appreciate that greatly. Not only does it provide a safety precaution, but we can confer later."

"I give permission to both of you," Janzi said. "My mind has never been in better health, and I have nothing to hide."

Except the location of the mysterious manuscript. Phileas carefully shielded that thought.

"Excellent," he said.

Big Dragons Don't Cry

"Before we explore her mind, let's get an overall view of the electrical activity," Phileas said.

One of Oasis's foremost scientists had invented a computer that measured mental and emotional activity in the brain. Romala hooked his mother up to the machine with electrodes.

"I'm surprised to see so little activity in the left prefrontal cortex," she said. "The Chief Healer has always been a woman of great intelligence and reason."

Phileas pointed at the screen. "Look at all the red. The active emotions have probably suppressed the logical functions. That's why you see so little blue on the screen. I find it odd that, agitated as she is, she doesn't seem to be fearful. The right prefrontal cortex is lively."

"You think I don't know anything about the brain?" Janzi demanded. "My right prefrontal cortex is jumping for joy because I'm happy to finally know the truth."

"We're glad to hear that," Phileas said in his most soothing voice. "Healer Kyle, let's link."

Sensing, the art of entering another's awareness and locating areas of emotional disturbance, was a Healer's most powerful tool. It was also the most dangerous, because the Healer, if not fully detached from the subject's turbulence, might become infected by it.

Phileas closed his eyes and took a series of deep breaths, breathing out all loose strands of personality and emotional turbulence, breathing in the cool, dry air of logic and reason. *I am a vehicle for the light of truth*, he repeated silently. *My work is to go into this troubled mind and cleanse it of accumulated poison. I will at all times shield myself from that poison. I attach no personal glory to the idea of success. My work is for the benefit of humankind and for this disturbed being.*

The sensation of entering another's mind was dreamlike, except that the skilled and well-shielded Healer observed, rather than entered, the dream of another.

Healer Kyle's mind was a calming place, with softly waving green fronds and the fragrance of lavender and chamomile, a tidy and well-tended garden of a mind. Phileas suspected that weeds

grew on side paths, but, like all people who practiced mind mastery, she'd barred those paths from others' view.

His mind wasn't garden-like. It was a library, full of books, some worn from use, others new, their bindings uncracked. Not all of these books made for wholesome consumption, but he kept the unsuitable ones deep in the back, in a small, locked room.

When he saw Romala walking down an aisle lined with rows of volumes on healing, he knew the link was established. He reminded himself to observe dispassionately as he began a slow, cautious probe into Janzi's mind.

The outskirts were littered with tattered frills of feeling: longing for her decades-dead mother, concerns for his own well-being, and other emotions that a Chief Healer should have swept away as part of routine mind cleansing. Clearly, his mother had been declining for some time, but she'd known how to conceal this, failing only when her cluttered mind had exploded and spewed forth dangerous nonsense.

Maybe. He reminded himself that he was still clearing away the outskirts of consciousness. He went deeper, looking as he traveled to see if, in the midst of this disorder lay any information about this manuscript. Finding none, he took the most heavily trodden neural pathway into the center of Janzi's mind. As he probed, she responded with a series of sensory images. The path turned muddy and overgrown with weeds. The atmosphere was dank, oppressive, and foul. It would be impossible to plant the seeds of mental health in such a poisonous environment.

Phileas had never been in a place like this, but awareness, slow as water dripping from a mossy branch, penetrated his own mind. This was the swamp, the dismal landscape he'd seen every time he'd attempted to heal those brave and honest beings who'd come for help when they found themselves afflicted with the Earther disease. Their terrifying images had described clammy air thick with mosquitoes and gnats and an environment populated with hissing snakes and deadly spiders. In Phileas' considered judgment, their desperation to escape that nightmare world had been the main ingredient in their successful healing.

Big Dragons Don't Cry

No such desperation moved Janzi. Her mind seemed perfectly comfortable about housing this horror show. It was far too soon to admit failure, but one could reasonably conclude that additional healings would be required. He was looking around to see what temporary repairs might be made when the earth began to shake beneath his feet, and noxious steam overpowered the general odor of rot.

And the Dragon appeared, no fire-breathing demon, but a cartoon character, with a big, goofy smile and soft eyes. *I am your friend.*

The horror of it briefly disarmed Phileas, pulling him into the dream and hurling him back to his childhood.

"If you're a bad boy, the Dragon will have you for breakfast," parents told their children. In the schoolyard, the children shouted, "Kill the dragon!" beating a defenseless tree with their sticks, vying to outdo each other in the shrillness of their screams. He was the best, always, because he hated the Dragon, because dragon hating was the only passion allowed full expression, and because he already knew he would be the leader of the people.

The wrongness of Janzi's diseased mind made him want to vomit. With supreme effort, he turned his back on the still-smiling beast and ran out of the swamp. Once safe, he gathered together his mental powers and imagined an impenetrable hedge bristling with the thorns of reason and logic to separate Janzi from her thoughts about the monster. Having completed that work, he slowly pulled himself out of her mind.

Because of the arduous nature of his labors, he found it necessary to allow himself a brief period of unconsciousness. When he opened his eyes, Romala was looking at him with concern.

"Are you all right, Guardian?"

"Drained. If I had to do a healing right now, I probably couldn't."

She glanced at Janzi, whose eyes were closed. "I don't know if it would help. She's gone into a coma."

Phileas suppressed the guilt and relief he felt at that news. Logically, the coma helped. "The Chief Healer is elderly. We know that often the aged become deluded. As their physical strength fades,

so does their mental grip. Furthermore, it may be that the Chief Healer was over-zealous in her work and didn't allow herself necessary periods of recuperation. That will be the official statement. However, only the most trusted Healers can be allowed to attend her, and they are to let you know the moment she speaks. And you are to send word to me."

Romala nodded. "May I ask you something? Could there be any truth to what she said about Zena?"

"Zena? *Mother of Mind*?"

She flinched, but didn't retreat. "It was logical to ask."

He erased his brief guilt for frightening her by apologizing. "Forgive my descent into emotion. We must always ask. To rest in the feathery comfort of certainty represents mental sloth of the worst kind. However, you surely saw the disarray of my mother's mind and the dragon."

"I didn't see the dragon. I saw ponds choked with weeds and slime."

"Probably the swamp," Phileas said.

"Perhaps, for I also saw trees whose roots and trunks rotted in stagnant water. I breathed foul, damp air. The images I saw, though, were of a mother sick with grief over her alienation from her son. I saw her heart bleeding with the unhealed wound that was the loss of him when he was so young."

He was glad he'd only seen the dragon. Even a second-hand vision of Janzi's suffering threatened his mental self-control. "Leave me," he said. "I must think about this."

But he couldn't think about his mother. Instead, he thought about Zena. Discreet as Romala was, Phileas wasn't about to tell her what was known only to Guardians: that Zena, too, had gone off the deep end during her last days. There'd always been suspicions about a manuscript. Earlier Guardians had ordered searches of every library in the land, but nothing had shown up.

He'd uncovered no traces of the manuscript in Janzi's mind. Still, she could have hidden an entire library in all that disorder. And, though he loathed the idea that dread, one of the lowest forms of

Big Dragons Don't Cry

emotion, was tarnishing his mind, he found it impossible to shake the belief that everything that could go wrong would go wrong under his regime, that in years to come—if, indeed, there *were* years to come—he would be known as Phileas the Failure.

Chapter 4

Serazina sat on her bed and stared out the window, watching a hawk soar through the sky. "I wish I were a bird or a cat or a fish—anything but a human."

Berto, leaning against her dresser, quoted the Oasis creed in a bored voice. "I am proud to be a human, superior to the creeping and flying beasts. I value my ability to rise above base animal feelings and sensations. I pledge to break the shackles of emotion and reach ever higher into the pure realm of intellect."

"I said that, every day for twelve years of school, but I never believed it."

"Of course not. You wanted to *feel*. You have an excellent mind, but you're so determined to protect your feelings that you won't admit it."

He'd never before made feelings sound so slimy, like rolling in worms. "No, I won't let them change who I am, and my feelings are the best thing about me. They make me alive, instead of half-dead, like a lot of people in Oasis. Maybe you'd rather I was like them. Maybe you'd rather have a full-blooded Etrezian girlfriend who doesn't start crying at the sight of a kitten or puppy. Are you tired of me?"

He moved to the bed and hugged her. "Don't even think that. No one is like you. Why are you so depressed? Are you worried about the final exams?"

Her shoulders slumped. "I'm terrified, even though I've used my *excellent* mind to protect myself. I had enough control to pass the school tests that identified the Feelies, and I've been smart enough to act stupid all these years."

"Why don't you trust it to get you over this last hurdle?"

"Because of my dreams. It's the final interview, but instead of an examiner, the Guardian is conducting it, and his black Etrezian eyes

Big Dragons Don't Cry

see right through me. He says, 'Girl, you're a fraud,' because I've failed to convince him I'm stupid. In some versions, he sends me to the department that hooks people up to the machines that measure emotional activity. I break them. As punishment for bypassing the holy laws of reason and logic, they send me to a rehabilitation center, and the techs shock that filthy *knowing* out of me. Sometimes they cut it out."

"No!" Berto made a fist. "I won't let that happen. Let's leave. We'll go to Tamaras, where minds are impure and people indulge their senses and enjoy life. You've got to live in a place where no one denounces passion, where you can cry without people staring at you and maybe taking you off to the House of Healing for rewiring."

The birds sang to her, the trees in the forest bent their leafy heads, and the dancing blades of grass whispered, *Stay*. How could she move to a place where the air reeked of garbage and too many humans, their feelings and sensations as rank to her awareness as rotting food?

"Serazina, listen. I'll never be able to paint the way I want to here. And they might not let us get married if we stay."

When she looked into him more deeply, she was flooded with his fear and desperation to convince her. "But *Tamaras*?"

His eyes blazed with anger. "You say you won't let them change who you are, but you let them fill you with prejudice. We've been trained to believe Tamaras is awful. The people eat fried food, listen to loud music, and like sex. What animals. I'm Tamaran, do I qualify?"

Berto's rage burned her cheeks. "You like sex," she said, trying to divert him.

"Sorry," he said, "but even if you weren't in danger, and I weren't worried about painting the way *I* feel, I'd be ready to leave because I hate those racial stereotypes. Etreznians have the best minds. That's why they run the place. Dolocairners are so waterlogged with emotions that they're incapable of mental labor, and don't they worship dragons? Those crafty Tamarans are tricksters. Never mind that we've all been living here for five hundred years."

"I know. Do you think it's fun to be a mixture of waterlogged Dolocairn and supposedly smart Etreznian, a *hybrid*?"

Berto lowered his head. "And you face a danger bigger than mind modification or surgical alternation. What if you get sent to examiners who realize that you have the sensing gift?"

She held him tight. "That's in my dreams, too, but I was disqualified last year. If I hadn't had a brilliant older sister, I wouldn't have been tested at all. They rarely test hybrids. Our Etreznian blood is polluted beyond salvation."

"Ordinarily, I'd agree with you, but the Guardian will soon be forty years old, without an heir in sight. The people are getting nervous. I admit that the odds of your being found out are small, but do you want to take that chance?"

"I'd die first," Serazina said.

He hugged her. "No, we'll leave first."

The circle of his arms comforted her. If they were together, nothing could hurt her. "But why Tamaras? And I don't mean that as a racial slur."

"Would you prefer the baking heat of Etreznia? Or maybe you have a fondness for the ice and snow of Dolocairn."

"No one does. Only Godlies who really want to suffer go to Dolocairn. You're right, but I don't know."

Berto stroked her hair in a way guaranteed to soften her resistance. "We don't have to leave tomorrow. We'll plan and prepare; we'll save our nats and zenas until we have enough money to hold us while we look for work. You have time to get used to the idea."

But she wouldn't. Ever.

"Serazina?" her mother called from downstairs. "If you and Berto are going to see that play, you need to leave soon."

Serazina groaned quietly. As an early graduation gift, Fiola, her mother had given her two tickets to Part I of *Zena Triumphant*, an operatic version of the life of her Etreznian ancestor, the one who had started all the trouble. "Coming," she said.

Big Dragons Don't Cry

They clattered down the stairs to the living room, where Fiola sat at a computer and her older sister clicked on the keyboard of her portalibrary.

"Reading something interesting, Elissia?" Serazina asked.

"Ten years of reports from the Water Commission," Elissia said, rubbing her eyes. "I downloaded them from the Science Library, and I'm supposed to upload my comments before a meeting on Monday. We have to find a solution to the problem of drought."

The heavy black hair coiled on Fiola's head quivered slightly as she looked at Elissia, and the dimmest tinge of pride brightened her obsidian eyes. "And you the youngest member of the Water Commission. I hope your sister will follow your example."

Although it would be a miracle if she did.

Serazina winced at the bitterness of her mother's unguarded emotions.

"Maybe seeing the play will remind her about the honor of being Zena's direct descendant." Elissia's face was solemn.

"A logical and desirable outcome," Fiola said.

"And speaking of logic, I think Serazina should stay at my apartment tonight."

Fiola nodded. "It's too dangerous at night in the city these days. I intend to write a letter to the Supreme Council about the drug problem."

"It's a very serious issue," Berto agreed.

Serazina, Berto, and Elissia left the house to take a high-speed train into the city, where they could buy drugs.

The train wasn't crowded, and they were all able to sit together. "Don't even think about not seeing the play," Elissia warned Serazina, who squirmed with guilt.

"How did you know what I was thinking?"

"Not because I read minds, dear sister. It's logical. No one under the age of thirty wants to hear actors shrieking for two hours about mind mastery. But she'll quiz you when you get home tomorrow."

"And you think I couldn't answer any of Mother's questions? 'What was the play about?' 'How strong emotions rot the mind and why we should fight to suppress them in every waking moment.'"

Elissia frowned. "We should resist some. Do you want everyone to be greedy, despairing, and jealous?"

"Look around," Berto said. "They are. And you didn't mention lust, which is awfully popular. Sometimes I think that the more emotions are thwarted, the bigger they become. If the leaders of this country were really logical, they'd figure that out."

Elissia kicked a pile of litter someone had illegally left on the train. "And you aren't going to change them. Berto, if you love my sister, you've got to be worried that she'll end up in a padded cell or with pieces of her brain missing."

"Hello, I'm right here," Serazina said, "and I know the dangers." It was a big day for telling her about that. Had her dreams infected those who loved her with her worries?

"But did you know that the Breeding Board is having so much difficulty coming up with potential candidates to be mother of the Guardian's heir that they've decided to retest all females descended from Zena, including hybrids, when they turn eighteen?"

"Just as I thought," Berto said.

Serazina's heart tightened. "No."

"Yes," Elissia said. "I'll never know how you got yourself disqualified in the first go-round. They saw right away that I have only weak sensing skills, but how did they miss you?"

"I didn't bathe for three days beforehand. I made my hair really messy. I acted as if I were totally wasted on drugs. I was like 'Guardian who? Zena who?' They didn't even want to come near me."

"But you might not succeed this time," Berto said. "That settles it. We'll leave before September."

Elissia's black eyes were fiery. "Do it."

Before her stop came, Elissia handed Serazina a set of keys to her apartment. "I won't be there. You'll have the place to yourself."

"Hot date?" Berto asked.

Big Dragons Don't Cry

Her eyes softened. "Special guy."

"Just make sure your genetic and mental profiles are guaranteed to create a crop of outstanding citizens. 'Each generation must rise above the last.'"

"Oh, Berto, if you knew how I worry about that, and I'm not the only one. Someone started a dating service where everyone is screened for compatibility. You get a list of approved candidates from the Breeding Board. Can you imagine anything more deadly?"

The train stopped and Elissia kissed them quickly. "Have fun."

Serazina and Berto got off at the next stop and hurried down the streets to the State Playhouse, a squat concrete building. Inside, it was no more beautiful. The walls were unfinished concrete blocks, and the space was dimly lit and crowded with uncomfortable chairs.

The play had already begun. Serazina studied the program notes and saw they'd missed the scene of Zena's abduction from the desert oasis in Etrencia where she'd been born. Now, having been sold into slavery, she was living in a Tam Town harem. Her master, the villain of the piece, was suitably licentious, rubbing his big hands together and frequently flinging his slave onto a bed, but nothing much happened. Oasis playwrights didn't write about sex.

They didn't write about passionate emotions, either, but it was necessary to show how Zena's rage at being a concubine added mental enslavement to her physical bondage. Of course, it also led to the great awakening, the moment Zena realized that if she could master her destructive emotions, she could win her freedom.

Could I? Serazina wondered. If I could master the fear and guilt that enslave me, wouldn't I be happier?

The trouble was that the official Oasis list of undesirable emotions also included passion, exhilaration, and the love of nature, and tenderness for small animals. The most prohibited sense was the one most important to Serazina: the deep knowing that something was true, a sureness that needed neither reason nor logic. It went against everything for which Oasis stood, and in Oasis you either toed the line completely or your brains got scrambled.

She could never be as cold and deliberate as her ancestor. Zena, daughter of a snake charmer and granddaughter of a renowned witch, transformed the skills she'd learned in order to charm people instead of snakes and to enthrall them with visions of freedom. Her harem mates became disciples, and slaves who traveled the streets of the city on errands spread the word that a liberator had come to help those who could learn to free themselves of enslaving emotions.

Throughout the city, captives replaced despair and anger with fierce watchfulness. "We await the day," sang the actors in one chorus that seemed to go on forever, but finally the day came, and the slaves arose. The uprising was violent, but Zena justified the slaughter by saying that sentiment over worthless human lives was the greatest enslavement of all.

Serazina thought a little romance might enter the story when Zena, stepping over the body of her former master, met Nathan, the messenger who'd coordinated much of the citywide uprising, but she was disappointed. Zena coolly examined the young man and said, "You may become my husband," and extended her arm to him.

"Ghastly," Berto said when the play was finally over. "Let's go to the Bazaar and get high."

They walked a few blocks and plunged into bright colors and loud music. Serazina's senses, dulled by the play, came alive again.

"I hear they talk about cleaning up this area," she said.

Berto shook his head. "Never happen. Better to have all the degenerates in one area, where they can be watched. Everyone needs the Bazaar."

Serazina knew she did. Unpleasant as it was to be in the city, she cherished the freedom she felt here. "I hope they don't."

"Even if they do, we'll be gone."

"Be gone, be gone, greed and lust and mind destruction through drugs." A man wearing a black Godly robe shouted on the street corner, grabbing the arms of passersby. "Sinners, hear me, your fleshly indulgences weaken your minds. A weak people are a conquered people. In his filthy lair, the dragon rejoices over the

Big Dragons Don't Cry

surrender of the Oasis spirit. You do his work, sinners, traitors! Nathan curse you, blessed Zena curse you!"

The black heat of his wrath choked Serazina. "I can hardly breathe," she whispered.

Berto guided her away. "Never call yourself to their attention. In the bars, people are saying the Godlies in the Bazaar are spies."

They walked through the Dolocairn district on their way to the bar. On either side of the entrance to a cheese store stood big wooden tubs full of early spring flowers. The reds and yellows assaulted Serazina with their loveliness, and the thin membrane in which she tried to enclose her emotions burst.

A woman walked by, her hand on her belly, and all the sadness and tears of a miscarriage flooded Serazina's heart. Before she had recovered from that, a drunk staggered past them, his heart stuffed with emotions too tattered to identify. Next passed a Godly whose mind whipped at tender feelings. *Weakness! Blasphemy!*

"Berto, please."

He grabbed her arm and pulled her into the Rainbow. The air in the bar was cool and scented with lavender and the resinous odor of cactus flower. Faceted prisms reflected the colors of gel-covered lights to cast a diffused glow in the large room. Serazina could breathe again.

"A glass of wine?" Berto asked.

"No thanks." In the early stages of drinking, she enjoyed the dulling of emotion. After a while, though, it had the opposite effect, opening her even more to the moods of everyone around her.

The drug waiter came around with a tray of capsules. Berto bought some Flash; he liked to hallucinate. Serazina preferred the drugs that created a kind of mindless happiness, the feeling that she was at the bottom of a lake and would never drown.

"I'll take some Numbs," she said.

"Numbs?"

Berto's upset was fiery. Serazina withdrew her hand from his arm.

"Sorry," he said, "I was thinking about Elissia's empty apartment. Sex is so much nicer when I don't imagine your mother wishing I were an Etrezian."

"I still feel lacerated, and I want a break from myself. I'll only take one cap and some Dance."

All drugs and some other substances had a distinct taste and smell for her. More than once, a scent of wrongness had saved her from tainted substances. She sniffed the capsule. Reassured by the sweet aroma of honeysuckle, she swallowed it. A few minutes later, she touched Berto again, and he felt cool and peaceful.

A singer stood on the platform at the end of the long room, singing a mournful tune. Many young people were devoted to Wail. A genre of music from Dolocairn that exalted feelings, whether sad or happy, it wasn't permitted play on public airtime.

"My mind imprisons me," the singer howled. "How can I get free? Feelings crushed and dead, electrodes in my head."

Some of the singer's emotionalism was contrived to suit the song, but Serazina sensed dark and tangled feelings like the weeds at the bottom of a stagnant pond.

"I can't stand Wail," Berto said. "I imagine some Dolocairner singing it and causing an avalanche that buries an entire mountain village."

Apparently others agreed, because a cry rose up for some Body. The band switched to a lively beat, with heavy emphasis on Etrezian goatskin drums. Serazina, Dance pulling her to her feet, got up with Berto.

Except as a form of exercise to release excessive physical energy, dancing was not encouraged, especially the slow, sensuous rubbing that Serazina and Berto now began. Others were on the dance floor, so Serazina didn't feel so conspicuous, except that she was sure she must radiate flames.

"Let's go," she said to Berto.

Elissia lived in an apartment complex for young government employees. Near the city center, its drab gray façade was unornamented, and her one-room apartment was equally austere. Serazina didn't bother turning on the lights. She and Berto unfolded the couch into a bed and fell on it, reaching for each other with a passion fueled by drugs and desperation.

Big Dragons Don't Cry

Sex released Serazina so intensely that it was often days before her emotions built up again to the danger point. After their lovemaking, she slept peacefully, her arm around Berto.

She woke up late the next morning and jumped out of bed. "Berto." She shook him. "I have to go work at the House of Healing."

"I'll walk around the city and do some sketching," he said. "Meet you for dinner? At Al'asso? I feel like eating Etrezian food."

As always, Serazina noticed the ugly buildings in the center of the city. In Tamaras they had turrets and wrought iron. Even Etrezia had minarets and beautiful domes. Oasis architecture specialized in pyramids and obelisks stabbing the sky.

Only the House of Healing was different. A verdigris dome topped it, and ivy twined up its pillars. Abstract designs in stained glass let in soft green light.

Serazina went to her locker in the basement and changed to her laundry worker's uniform, dyed the dull yellow of leaves about to die, and reported to the supervisor.

"You're up on the Feelies floor today."

She went up the stairs to the ward. Drugs kept the patients here relatively comatose, their emotions dulled. Those who became stable on medication were sometimes released without surgery or shock therapy. Many of them, though, stopped taking their pills once they felt better, and the cycle of hospitalization began anew. Three visits to the Feelies ward guaranteed a date with either electrodes or knives.

Serazina went down the hall to check on towels and drinking water in each room. In the first room she saw a woman who'd once been her teacher in Dolocairn literature. Citizen Whiterock had become overcome with emotion while reciting a poem about snow. She'd sobbed out the line, "The snow *falls* and *falls* and *falls*" for fifteen minutes before someone had gone for school security. Now she sat in a chair, bundled in blankets, her lips moving silently, her emotions a damp shroud enveloping her.

Serazina replaced the water pitcher quickly and ran out of the room. In the next room a man huddled beneath his bedding. When Serazina tried to lift it, he clutched it more tightly about him. "Don't want the dragon to see me," he whispered.

Serazina wished she could tell an administrator that sending her to the Feelies ward was a bad idea for all concerned, but that would mean admitting her sensing ability. She tried to use Mind. *Three hours left. If I finish the rounds, I can go sit in the staff lounge. I'll be seeing Berto soon.*

She managed to do everything necessary in the frightened man's room and went to the next room, a private one. The door was closed, and she knocked on it.

A nurse opened it a crack. "No one is supposed to come in here, but you look harmless."

Serazina translated that to *insignificant*. Any secrets beyond the door would obviously mean nothing to a worthless hybrid. She entered the room. Lying on the bed was an Etrezian woman in her sixties. Her eyes were closed, and her chest barely moved. Her black skin was nearly gray.

"I want to put a flotation pad beneath her," the nurse said. "Would you lift her? She hardly weighs a thing."

Serazina easily lifted the old woman's body, light as a bundle of dried stalks, while the nurse slid the air-filled padding beneath her.

"She'll rest more comfortably now, not that she probably knows the difference, poor thing. I've got to go to the front desk and give a report on her condition. Get her new towels and fresh water."

The nurse left. After Serazina filled up the water pitcher and placed it on the bedside table, the woman opened her eyes and smiled.

Serazina gaped at her. "You're supposed to be in a coma."

"A simple matter of mind control. It serves my purposes to pretend."

"Why let me know?"

"You look like a descendant of Zena, and I read you as trustworthy. Some day you'll know the truth. In the meantime, trust the Dragon."

Big Dragons Don't Cry

"What?"

The woman put her hands on her lips and closed her eyes. Thirty seconds later, the nurse returned.

"Did I hear talking in here?"

Serazina shook her head.

"Get on with your work."

Serazina left the room.

Trust the dragon? The woman was crazy.

After work she went to Al'asso, where Berto sat with some of their classmates.

"Hi," he called out. "We're complaining about our future."

"There's a lot to complain about," she said.

"Tell me," said Clona, a Dolocairn girl who wore her emotions on her pouting mouth. "Ninety percent of the field workers' kids end up in the field. You're lucky that all your parents work in the city."

"My father doesn't," Serazina said.

"No, but Johar Clare gets no soil on his hands. He's responsible for the production from all the fields in Oasis West. Think they'll put you in the fields?"

Obvious as the venom in her words was, her emotions were even more aggressive. Serazina tried to neutralize them. "You're telling me that, when I've just come from my work hauling hospital sheets full of shit and piss and wiping patients' ulcerated bottoms? Some great connections. Clona, it's not my fault you're angry at the world."

Clona sawed at her lamb. "Sorry. It's just that there are so few places where I can bitch."

The girl's anger melted into sodden self-pity. As sometimes happened, Serazina was glad to sense the emotions of another because it reminded her that others suffered more than she. Clona, struggling against the jealousy and despair she'd been taught was wrong, sank ever deeper into them, like someone sucked down by quicksand.

It's better to allow emotions, Serazina told herself, *even if it's more dangerous.*

C. M. Barrett

"The safest place to bitch is beyond the border," Berto said. "And when I leave, I might spend a week getting it out of my system."

"You're really leaving?" someone asked.

"What choice do I have?"

"It's hopeless, isn't it?" Serazina asked when Berto walked her to the door of her house.

"Pretty much." He looked up at the sky, gleaming with a lacy pattern of stars. "I love it here, despite everything. The Tamaran sky won't be so beautiful. What if I lose my inspiration?"

And what will I lose? Serazina wondered.

A depressed dragon, impudent kitten, and frightened young woman make an unlikely trio to save the dragon's swamp and lead humans to wholeness. They need the help of the country's leader, but he ignores animals, fears the dragon, and wants the young woman to be the mother of the heir he so desperately needs. Only a crisis that threatens his country can persuade him to lose his mind, find his heart, and save his people.

Big Dragons Don't Cry

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