

# CROSS-EYED DRAGON TROUBLES

GLORIA OLIVER



**Cross-eyed  
Dragon  
Troubles**



**Gloria Oliver**

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Cross-eyed Dragon Troubles

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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to my husband, John. It was his creativity and vision, which made this wonderful adventure possible.

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## Chapter 01

IT JUST WASN'T fair. Talia scuffed at the soft ground with her foot. A hawk's cry echoed in the air, resonating with her own inner turmoil.

She sighed. It was just too early. She wasn't ready to be apprenticed yet.

With a frown, she looked up from where she sat on the front steps of her home and scanned the tilled fields and small buildings comprising the only world she knew. She scuffed angrily at the ground again then punched the bag at her side for good measure. She was only fifteen—she wasn't ready!

Only three days ago her parents calmly informed her they'd apprenticed her to the Dragon Knight's Guild. She'd ranted and raged at them, and they'd listened to

her arguments, but they all knew it would change nothing. It was just the way things were done.

Was it so grievous a thing that she didn't want to leave her home? She would have a better life, more opportunities, by being apprenticed, they told her. But what if she didn't want those things? She was perfectly happy here!

Though their town was small, there were several people she could apprentice with here rather than go so far away. None of their crafts were all that interesting, but she would get to stay here. Yet her parents told her it was too late for that—money had changed hands.

A soft breeze caressed her cheek as if trying to comfort her troubled face. Talia breathed deeply, calmed a little by the scent of turned earth and evergreens—all pieces of what she thought of as home.

She knew her parents gave up a lot to get her apprenticed, and with the Dragon's Knight Guild no less. She would do her duty because it would make them happy, but she couldn't pretend to like it.

Not when they were coming for her today.

Her few possessions didn't take long to pack. Three sets of clothes and undergarments. The brush and mirror set Uncle Shay brought as a gift from his last visit to the capital two years ago. A dress, a present from her mother, made from fabric bought with the last of their savings. Last, the strange rock she and Lir found in the river when they were little and which she'd kept all these years.

Talia took out the mirror and studied her reflection and that of the whitewashed porch behind her on its surface. She stared at her short, brown, curly hair, her triangular face, and dark brown eyes. How would she



look once her apprenticeship was over? Would her parents even recognize her? Would her years away change her until her home meant little to nothing to her anymore?

She put the mirror back in her bag, shying away from such thoughts. All her worldly possessions were in this small bag. She was sure others owned more to show for their lives than she did, but material things weren't so important to her. Other things she couldn't take she would miss more—her room in the loft, her mom's special winter porridge, the smell of freshly tilled fields. Watching the sunsets and the rising stars from the roof. Lir's teasing and playing tag after school. Helping her father with his wood projects and working the fields. All the things she could only take with her as memories. A pang of coming loss poured through her. It was all she could do not to cry. She didn't want to go.

A large shadow crossed the yard. Talia glanced up and used her hand to shade her eyes. She didn't recognize the strange silhouette. Blinking rapidly, she saw a shape zoom past the morning sun. Its wings weren't in the familiar figure of a falcon's or a hawk's; they were more angular, wider. The tail, it was all wrong. It was long and thin. She doubted it was made of feathers. Then the strange shape twisted in the air and dropped, spiraling down.

"Mom! Dad!" Talia raced out from beneath the porch, trying to keep the odd, falling figure in sight. She heard the door of the house open behind her but didn't look back as her parents hurried outside. "Look up there!"

She pointed upwards and watched the shape grow larger and larger as it fell. It twisted and spiraled at

reckless speeds. Her breath caught as she made out the creature's long neck and big head, its colossal body colored dark green with purple flowing from the scaled ridges on its back.

Goosebumps flowed up her arms—she was seeing an actual dragon!

Talia's eyes grew even wider as she spotted something glinting on the dragon's back and realized it was an armored figure. Someone was on the thing.

The dragon and rider continued to plummet. Talia took a step back, her chest tight as they came closer. Something was wrong. They were coming down too fast. Just when she thought they would crash to their deaths, the dragon pulled up his body and instead plowed sideways into the ground. Dirt and plants were thrown everywhere. Its large body came to a stop in the middle of the cornfield.

"No!" Talia rushed forward in a half-panic, as she saw the rider go under the dragon's massive bulk. Her hurried breaths filled with the smell of earth and something more profound, foreign. She gave the beast a wide berth as she ran around it looking for signs of the rider. She hesitated as the dragon rocked once against the plowed ground then righted itself.

She stared in dumbfounded amazement as a moment later the rider who'd been pinned beneath the monstrous mass slowly sat up and staggered to his feet. Seemingly unhurt, he reached up and removed a dirt-covered helmet whose large red plume had seen better days.

"Are you all right?" Talia stared, not sure how he could possibly be standing after what she just saw.

The young man shook out his sweat-matted, sandy-blond hair and glanced over at her. His intense blue

gaze locked with her own. A small smile tugged at his lips, brightening his flushed face. "I'm quite all right. Thank you for asking." He took off one of his gauntlets and ran a hand through his wet hair.

Talia frowned, for though her mind insisted it should be different, other than looking as if he'd been at work in the fields for hours without rest, the armored man seemed to be just as he claimed.

"Do you have any water?" he asked her softly.

It took her a moment to realize he was speaking to her.

"Oh. Yes, we have a well on the other side of the house. I'll, I'll get some for you."

"No, it's okay. I'll get it." The young man waved her off and staggered toward the residence.

Talia followed him with her gaze, still not sure whether or not she believed him. It was then she noticed her parents standing on the porch staring at her, their faces filled with fear and shock. She felt a cold shiver travel down her back as she remembered she wasn't alone. Even as her eyes moved of their own volition to glance to her right, the dragon's head swiveled on its long neck to take a look at her with one, large, purple eye.

Talia heard her mother gasp, even as she felt her own knees lock, the rest of her going terribly still.

The strange smell she noticed as she approached them earlier was definitely coming from him.

Small, dark green scales with just a touch of purple covered the dragon's long face. Its eye was a deeper purple, almost black, and it stared at her with keen intelligence. It was only when it tilted its head to the side to look at her with both eyes that she realized they

were crossed.

*Hello.*

She heard her own in-drawn breath of surprise echoed by her parents as the soft voice rang in their heads. Was there a touch of amusement in the greeting? Talia didn't know and at the moment was too terrified to care. "H—hello?"

The massive, scaled body moved and shook the ground as the dragon twisted to take an even better look at her. A long, snake-like tongue darted out of the dragon's large mouth; she could see sharp, wicked teeth glinting at her. She gulped as it occurred to her the dragon might be hungry.

Before the thought could go much further, the dragon's rider came back from around the house carrying a filled bucket with water. "Here you go, Clarence." As if the large creature before him were nothing to fear, he set the water before it.

Talia stared at the bucket. It looked like a thimble compared to the size of the giant snout. The dragon's tongue reached down, dipped into the water and rapidly flicked it up into the gaping mouth.

"Do you have any other buckets?" the young man asked. "It would really help me out. He's likely to want to go through at least ten of those." He gave her a friendly look.

Talia tore her gaze away from the drinking dragon so she could find a voice to answer him with. "Su—sure. I'll go get them." Feeling abruptly free, she took off and headed to the shed at the back of the house. She glanced back behind her once, not totally able to discard the fear the dragon might come after her.

Breathing hard, she quickly searched the shed for the

buckets and found three. She grabbed them and rushed to the well where she found the young rider waiting for her.

"Here."

"Thanks!" He took the buckets and dropped the line to bring up more water. "By the way, my name is Kel, and my friend over there is Clarence."

She could only nod, trying hard not to look in the dragon's direction.

"Your name is Talia, right?" She could only nod again.

As Kel worked to pull up the water, she studied him carefully for the first time. It wasn't often she got a chance to meet strangers, and this pair was stranger than most. In these parts, blue eyes were rare, especially bright ones like his. Kel's features were rounded, not as sharp as those of the people around her village. His hair was also lighter than tended to be the norm. She rather favored it.

She'd also noticed in his voice a slight accent she'd not heard before. She was sure he must be from somewhere far away.

"He'll need to rest for a few minutes before we can start back," Kel explained. "I hope it's all right."

Talia quickly nodded, then looked away as she realized he'd caught her staring. "No, no, that's fine."

After the buckets were filled, she volunteered to help him carry them over to where the dragon still lounged in the field, though she made sure not to get too close. Only after three more sets of buckets were brought over did Kel finally sit down and take a long drink for himself. Once he was done, he leaned back on the ground, his armor creaking, and sighed with relief.

Talia jumped as Clarence slowly stretched out and laid himself out in the sun as well, his eyes closed.

She stared at them as they lay there and rested, as it slowly dawned on her that this man was a Dragon Knight— that these were the people she was apprenticed to. It also made her think of her parents. Glancing behind her, she saw they'd come off the porch but were sticking quite close to one another. Her mother spotted her looking at them and, after making sure Kel and the dragon weren't paying them any attention, waved for her to come over.

Talia did and noticed her father staring sadly at his ruined fields then with disbelief at the cause of the destruction of some of this year's crop. She turned to look that way herself.

Almost as if he sensed he was the object of scrutiny, Clarence opened his eyes and swiveled his massive head to stare at them. Talia suddenly found herself hugged hard from behind by her mother, who pulled her a few more steps back.

With a long, rippling movement, the dragon rose to his feet. He shook the dirt off himself as would a dog throwing off water after a swim, then lumbered in a drunken walk to the edge of the fields and squatted. Before long, a large pile of dark excrement accumulated on the ground. Talia and her parents all curled their noses at the pungent smell.

*You can take this and sell it to your local alchemist. The three of them stared at the dragon as his words whispered themselves into their minds. Dragon refuse always brings in a good price. This will hopefully make up for the unfortunate mess I've made of your fields.*

None of them said anything; they just stared at the

dragon in amazement.

After a few minutes, Kel stretched and yawned before he sat up and quickly rubbed his face. Standing up, he brushed off some of the dirt Clarence inadvertently rained on him earlier and approached Talia and her stunned parents. "I almost forgot," he said, "I'm supposed to give you this." He took a small pouch from his belt and handed it to her father.

Her father opened the pouch then looked up, confused. Talia was released from her mother's hold as she, too, turned to see what was inside. As her father poured the contents out onto his hand, Talia was able to see what Kel had given them. Her eyes grew wide. In her father's palm, glinting in the sun, were three beautiful rubies. Her father stared at them, his mouth moving but no sound coming out. She'd never seen her father speechless before. "We, we don't understand..."

Kel's answering shrug was mostly dispelled in his armor. "It's just payment for the trouble and the fact your daughter is being taken so far from home."

Talia frowned, sure the damage and the inconvenience weren't worth a small fortune. Why would the knights pay them so much more than her parents paid to get her into the guild? It didn't make any sense to her. Was this really a standard practice of the dragon knights?

"If you'll get your things, I think Clarence is about ready to go." Talia found herself once more the recipient of Kel's shy smile.

"Ah, sure." She turned away as a bolt of excited fear shot through her. It was true—she was really going. It was happening. Sudden mixed feelings rose inside her, but not all of them were made of the unhappiness she

felt over the last few days.

Picking up her bag from where she'd left it on the porch steps, she suddenly found herself surrounded by her parents. The tears she saw gathering in her mother's eyes told her more than anything that this was real.

"Talía." Her mother took her in her arms and hugged her hard. She felt tears rising to her own eyes. Her mother eventually let go.

"Be good, won't you? I know you'll make us proud." Her father hugged her fiercely. Tears shone in his eyes as well.

She almost sobbed then. How was she going to go on without them?

"Be strong, my daughter." He slipped one of the rubies into her hand. "Write us if you can."

Her mother wiped away at her eyes. "Don't forget us. Always remember that we love you." The sorrow in her mother's eyes brought home to her that it was as difficult for them to let her go as it was for her to leave. Yet they still wanted her to do this.

She felt her throat grow tight. "I will. And I'll try really hard. I love you." She hugged them both at once. She was going; she was really going.

When she finally let them go, all their eyes were filled with tears. Talía turned away and wiped at her wet face, then searched for where she had dropped her bag. It was gone. Glancing around her, she spotted Kel with it, as he secured it to the battered two-person saddle strapped to the dragon's back. She hesitated a moment, then walked over to join them.

Almost there, she turned around to take a last look at her parents and her home. As hard as she could, she tried to engrave into her memory the view of the



whitewashed house with its sloping porch, the plowed fields with their earthy smell and swaying stalks of wheat and corn, the barn with all the sheep, cows, and horses. It would be years before she saw any of it again. But she would be back. Of this she was sure. She would make her parents proud even if she possessed no idea of what it was she would be doing.

Her eyes stinging, Talia turned away and forced herself to approach the dragon. She hurriedly rubbed her eyes again as she caught Kel studying her.

"I'll need to show you a couple of things before we get started," he said.

She noticed his light, amused smile as she still hesitated to get too near to Clarence. She made herself step closer.

"See these?" Kel pointed to some long, leather straps hanging from the saddle. "I'll help you tie them on once we get you up. They'll make sure you stay on your seat in case anything happens. The Administrator frowns on us losing any new students." His expression was serious, but his eyes were full of mirth. Clarence snorted behind them.

Talia wasn't sure she wanted to know just how exactly they went about losing a student.

"There's a place here you can use to hold on to." He pointed to a grip on the front of the second seat of the leather saddle. "If you feel you're slipping at all though, you might want to hold onto one of Clarence's scales instead." Gently he lifted one of the dragon's green, oval-shaped scales from where it lay flat against its brothers. "It's attached to his skin here, and it takes a lot to make one of them come off. It won't hurt him, so don't worry about it. He's also worm-free, so you don't

have to be concerned on that account, either."

Her brows drew together, not knowing about half of the things he just mentioned or what they meant. Why would a dragon have worms?

"Here, I'll help you up." Kel cupped his gauntleted hands together to give her a boost up Clarence's broad side.

Still tense and apprehensive, she put her foot in his cupped hands and, with a tentative hold on one of Clarence's scales, pulled herself up onto the back seat of the large saddle. Now that she was on board, the scent of oil and possibly jasmine mixed with the strange, animal scent she smelled before.

The leather saddle felt comfortable and warm and looked to have seen heavy use. Its surface was smooth, though not as smooth as Clarence's scale.

Once she settled herself in, Kel climbed up with the ease of long practice, using the scales as foot and handholds to climb up. He sat down in the saddle backward so he would be facing her.

Going slowly and explaining as he went, Kel showed her how to take each of the saddle's straps and where to loop them to safely secure herself in her seat. Once he tested their handiwork to make sure it was tight, he turned around and strapped himself in as well. When he was done, he took his helmet off the pommel before him and put it on.

Talia grabbed hold of the groove before her with a yelp as Clarence rose to his feet. She could feel his muscles moving beneath her, bringing her higher into the air than a horse ever could.

"The trip is going to be long and a little bumpy, I'm afraid." Kel turned his head in her direction. "You

might not have noticed it, but Clarence is cross-eyed, and he has an inner ear problem, too. It tends to make our trips a little interesting."

"But—" The word had barely left her lips when Clarence swept open his long wings with a snap. Realizing what it meant, she grabbed hold of the saddle even tighter. Clarence's legs churned the ground, and he went into a snaking run, then leaped into the air.

Talia was jerked back as the dragon moved. She held on for dear life. The wind whipped past her, smacking her as if it were angry. She turned to look down and watched in horrid fascination as all she knew shrunk below her. As Clarence pumped with his vast wings and spiraled upwards, roads became thin lines and fields took on the look of squares on a quilt. A thick dark blue line below them she was sure must be the Morrass River. Beside it, the small town of Queegam was turned into dozens of miniature dollhouses with ants crawling all about.

The wonder of the view was just beginning to imprint itself in her mind when Clarence stopped his climb and leveled out.

One of his wings dipped too far to the right and suddenly tilted them sideways.

The saddle shifted, and with a scream clamoring in her throat, Talia released the saddle's groove and grabbed hold of two of Clarence's scales. The scales were almost cool to the touch, but this was pretty much lost to her as Clarence overcompensated for his original error and threw them all sailing in the opposite direction.

The ride at no time grew steady. Without fail, every few seconds Clarence would invariably dip too far one

way or the other. It was all she could do just to hold on. She kept wishing the saddle held more straps, that it was nailed to Clarence's back, or better still that she'd never left the ground to begin with. A strong gust of wind caught Clarence's wings like sails and pushed them all back. Talia's scream was lost in the wind as Clarence tilted backward and over.

When the dragon twisted back to the right direction things got worse as he somehow got them turned upside down. Clarence dropped like a rock and took them with him. Talia tried to scream again but shut her mouth as her stomach rose to her throat. Any sound she might have made was stolen by the wind as if it were rejoicing in her misery. She clung on, her heart hammering in her chest, as Clarence was finally able to right himself.

*Sorry.* Clarence's tone seemed shy yet at the same time amused.

She felt a metal-shod hand on her shoulder but wasn't willing to open her eyes. Was this what it was to be a Dragon Knight? She wanted nothing to do with it. She wanted to go home.

The dizzying ride continued for what seemed like forever. They dipped, they dropped, they rolled. Hardly was there a moment it could be said they went in a straight line. She just held on knowing she had no choice but to endure it. But how did Kel do it? He had willingly got back on after the horrid landing at her house and with the dragon falling on top of him, too. Was he mad, then?

*We're almost there.* Clarence's voice came clearly into her mind. *If you look, you can see the school.*

Despite her stomach's vigorous protests, Talia opened her eyes to see where she would soon be living.

A large mesa rose before them snuggled amidst tall mountains. Nestled in the middle of this mesa was the largest building she'd ever seen. Instinctively, she knew what it was. It could be nothing else—and it was grander and more massive than she ever imagined from the stories told by the bards who occasionally traveled through town. It was a castle.

Clarence circled the mesa, almost as if he were giving her a chance to get a good look. His circling pattern brought them closer and closer. The structure grew before them the nearer they came. On top of the castle, at a steep angle, was a flat white dish with numbers. After a moment, Talia realized it was a clock—and it was huge! The one which was such a source of pride and joy to Queegam was nothing in comparison.

Balconies protruded from the castle on every side. Gigantic flying buttresses held the whole structure together, making it look even more extensive and grander than it already was.

Close to the stone castle was another building. It was almost as large as the former but made of wood rather than stone. The exterior was virtually identical in design but held long slit windows instead of balconies. A wooden castle? It was something she'd not heard of before.

Surrounding the castles were cultivated fields and a small forest. On one side of the grounds was a large strip of land which ran from one end of the mesa to the other, lined by bushes and trees. Once they came close enough, Clarence dived for it.

Talia lost all feeling in her hands, her knuckles turning white, as the ground seemed to rush up toward them. The castle and mesa expanded rapidly around

them as they headed straight down. She couldn't tear her gaze away from the approaching doom. Her mind screamed at her that she was about to die!

Clarence shifted up as the ground blurred before them like a wall and plowed into the strip of land, claws first. Talia's teeth clacked together from the impact, which made her already tight jaw hurt. The dragon slipped, his legs going out from under him, and he slid across the ground on his stomach. His body tilted sideways, throwing dirt up everywhere even as he continued to slide.

Talia ducked down onto the saddle, trying to avoid the flying clumps of earth. She held on with everything she possessed and watched the rolling dirt as Clarence dipped slightly more to one side, shifting her even closer to the moving ground. With cold terror, she recalled his landing on her father's fields. While Kel might somehow miraculously survive being landed on by a dragon, she doubted she would be as lucky. As fast as she could, she sent out quick prayers to as many of the twenty gods who watched over her land as she could recall.

Clarence's body plowed into a thick line of bushes which appeared as if they received this kind of treatment regularly. Talia felt her heart rise into her throat as she saw the lip of a cliff not ten arm lengths beyond them.

Both of Clarence's claws reached out, grabbed like anchors onto the dirt, and brought them to a rough stop before they could go over the side.

Talia made her lungs breathe again, until that moment absolutely sure they wouldn't make it. Her gaze was locked to the cliff's edge not five paces from

them; she was sure they were still about to fall.

"Talia, are you all right?"

She heard Kel turn around before her, his concern evident in his voice. Not trusting herself to do anything but scream if she opened her mouth, she forced herself to nod instead. He quickly undid his straps then turned fully in the saddle to work on hers.

Once they were all loosened, she found she still couldn't move. Her numbed fingers were wrapped tightly about Clarence's scales and didn't seem in any mood to let go.

Kel didn't say anything, but slipped out of the saddle to the ground and removed his helmet, shaking his damp hair. Clarence lay quietly, craning his neck to look at them, and waited for them both to get off.

Talia tried again to make her fingers move, but they were having nothing to do with it. She felt stupid and self-conscious half-hanging as she was from the saddle, but couldn't bring herself to attract attention to her present predicament. Even as she tried fervently to think of what she could do, she noticed Clarence's eyes focus in her direction. Kel suddenly turned from where he was retrieving her bag as if someone were speaking to him.

"Oh, you're right." Kel let go of the straps and pulled the gauntlets off his hands, letting them drop to the ground. He half-climbed back on the dragon, an apologetic look on his face. "Here, let me help you."

Talia glanced away as his hands touched her fingers and carefully worked to pry them off Clarence's scales one by one. She flinched as the blood flowed back into them again and they tingled with pain.

"Don't worry, they'll be as good as new in a minute."

Gently, he put her right hand between his and rubbed the feeling back into it.

She tried not to cringe as the pain in her hand got worse before it got better. After about a minute or so, he let go of her right hand and took up the other. As she experimentally flexed her fingers, he reached up to help her down. "Thanks."

Once on the ground, Talia found her knees feeling weak, but they held. She was very grateful. She was sure she'd already made enough of a fool of herself for one day.

After studying her for a moment to make sure she was all right, Kel turned back to Clarence and retrieved her bag. He gave it to her then picked up his gauntlets and helmet. "I'll meet you at your place once I've taken her inside. All right?" He glanced over at the dragon. The boy nodded as if he received an answer though Talia didn't hear anything.

The dragon waited patiently until they stepped away then rolled up to his feet. He shook himself, sending dirt and pieces of bush flying everywhere.

Talia used her arms to cover her face against the assault. When it seemed to be over, she peeked out only to find Clarence looking in her direction.

*It was a pleasure to meet you, Talia.*

"Y—yes, the same here." Though she definitely hoped she'd never have the pleasure of ever having to ride on him again. If all dragons flew the same as he did, she wasn't sure why anyone would ever want to become a Dragon Knight in the first place.

Clarence inclined his head, almost as if he guessed her thoughts. He then lumbered along the long dirt track they'd used for the landing over to a spacious, cobbled



path between the cultivated fields. Kel turned to follow in the same direction and waved for her to come along. Taking a deep breath, hoping her legs were steadier than before, she started after him.

Once her confidence grew and she became positive the ground would stay beneath her feet, Talia looked ahead at what lay down the road. The stone castle she'd seen from the air towered over her, imperious and foreboding. Three rows of balconies crowded the upper floors of the four-storied structure. Her mind boggled as she tried to count them and guessed they numbered around a hundred per level.

Between each balcony and descending all the way to the ground flying buttresses supported the massive walls. As she studied them, it felt as if she were gazing at a many-legged spider, lazily waiting for its next meal. She shuddered, feeling more and more insignificant in comparison to the mighty building. She glanced at Kel, who just kept walking as if the oppressive, towering structure before them were nothing at all. It was difficult to fathom how she might ever think of such a place as home.

The cobbled road split off to the right, and Clarence wove off in that direction. Kel kept on the main course and headed toward a set of dark double-doors. The doors were a full story tall and at least as wide as the length of two horses. The door on the right was slightly ajar, and he stepped through it to the inside. Talia reached out to touch the dark wood and found it amazingly smooth. The doors were as thick as her forearm was long.

Kel's footsteps echoed in the still air as he walked on the polished green marble floor within. The light was

muted inside though still bright enough to see by. The entryway was large with cushioned benches on the far side facing the doors. Colorful paintings of knights astride ferocious-looking dragons decorated the walls. A carved column rose to the tall ceiling every ten feet or so, shaped to represent knights in armor. The air smelled clean and the floor shined, yet all of it still seemed imbued with a deep sense of antiquity.

"Nice, don't you think?" Kel was smiling at her openmouthed amazement. She was only able to nod, not having seen anything so splendid in her life.

"This way." He led her down a broad hallway on the right.

They'd not gone far before he stopped in front of a closed door. He knocked on it twice then opened it, but didn't go in. "This is where I leave you. Tammer is inside. He'll get you your room assignment." He gave her a shy smile and set her bag on the floor. "Maybe I'll see you again later."

"Thank you." It was all she could think of to say. She was here. This was all really happening. The fact the only person she'd met was about to leave her only made her heart beat faster.

"Take care." Kel took his leave.

Talia watched him go as she stood not quite in the new room's open doorway until he disappeared from sight.

"Come on in, would you please? I haven't got all day."

She turned around, grabbed her bag, and stepped into the room at the impatient voice. "Sorry, sir."

The office she found herself in was small but comfortable. Several deep chairs sat before a long oak

desk, which was bare except for an inkwell and quill as well as a lone folder.

"Sit. Sit."

She did as she was told and tried not to look directly at the desk's occupant. The man there seemed to be about thirty. His hair was even lighter than Kel's, but his eyes were a deep brown. His squared features were bland and unexcited. Without ado, he opened the folder before him. "You're Talia from the village of Queegam, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir." She felt butterflies swash madly in her stomach.

Tammer made a notation on the papers before him. "You've been assigned to the Rimorn room," he said without much emotion. "You'll find it up the right corner stairs on the next level, the one with the red marble floor. Just follow the hallway. Your room will be the twenty-fifth on the right." He made another notation on the papers.

"Your appointment with the Administrator is tomorrow morning at nine," he continued. "You'll find her office behind the gold door on the fourth level." He glanced up, for the first time making eye contact. His brow arched high as he looked at her. "You do know how to read a clock face, don't you?"

"Y—yes." Pendrora, Queegam's schoolteacher, made sure they all learned how. The village owned a leaky water clock in the center of town, but it didn't keep good time. On many occasions, she'd wondered why her teacher bothered. The sun was more than good enough to tell time by. Plus, they didn't own a clock at home. Now she mentally thanked Pendrora for having made them learn it anyway.

"Good." Tammer scribbled something else on the papers. "I guess that's it then." He set the quill down. "Go ahead and find your room. Don't forget about your appointment in the morning." He closed the folder and dropped it into a drawer.

Talia stood up, clear on the dismissal, yet feeling there surely needed to be more. "But—"

Tammer stood up and led her outside into the hall, closing the office door behind them. "The stairs are over there. I suggest you get moving." He pointed off to the right to a stairwell in the far corner.

"But—"

Without another word, he turned away from her and headed off in the opposite direction. She stared after him, totally uncomprehending. This was all he felt she needed to know?

For hours the night before Kel came for her, she'd wondered what it'd be like to be here. Yet, though the building itself seemed more than anything she might have expected, her introduction to the guild was less than she'd thought possible. Was this how they did things in the outside world? How could they just bring in total strangers and tell them nothing at all then leave them on their own? How was she supposed to know what she could and couldn't do?

Abruptly uncertain and lost, Talia felt conspicuous standing there in the vast hallway alone. Realizing there was nothing else she could do, she headed for the stairs Tammer had pointed out to her.

The staircase leading up to her room at home was barely wide enough for a grown adult. The stairs before her now could have easily handled at least ten people standing side by side. The hard stone was worn down

from use. Her mind boggled at the number of feet which would have needed to walk on it to make it that way. Even the dark, wood banister was large, the same as everything else she'd seen of this place. She felt dwarfed and alone. Was such a vast place really necessary? She remembered her guess at the number of balconies she'd spotted on the outside of the castle and she was stunned by how many apprentices it would take to fill them all. Most large guilds held ten to thirty apprentices at a time, and those were only located in major cities. This place held many, many more, and they were all to be Dragon Knights? Were there that many dragons in the world?

The stairs reached a landing then continued up. The second floor, as she'd been told, was covered in red marble. Doors were set only on the wall closest to the outside, while on the opposite side were chest-high banisters facing the middle of the building, making the hallway a sort of indoor balcony. Other than for her, the hall was totally empty.

Talia started down the passage, counting doors, and tried to ignore her rising uneasiness. As she went along, she thought she heard low voices coming from the other side of the banister. Curious, and at the same time eager to prove this place held other living beings, she stepped over to take a look.

Beyond the railing, a vast expanse spread out before her all the way to the other side of the building. Looking up, she could see two more stories like this one. All three made a full rectangle and were open in the middle.

Beyond the top floor, she could see the angled ceiling for the roof, which in the center displayed huge

round holes covered in what appeared to be glass, which allowed the sunshine to filter inside.

Looking down, she found all those she'd not seen so far. The area below her was split into roofless rooms by flimsy, movable wooden walls. Children who appeared to be grouped by age sat in desks in clusters of twelve or so, listening raptly to a teacher. Their voices rose and mingled together so she couldn't make out what was being said. Soon she, too, would be there with them.

Talia watched them for a few minutes, her previous unease settling a bit at the normal looking activity. The children and young people she spotted below looked to be of all races and colors. She'd not realized so many existed. Back home, Pendrora used some simple maps to show them other places but they'd never really meant much to her. Now she saw the world might just be a lot bigger than she'd ever thought.

Finally pulling herself away from the balustrade, she resumed her count and searched for her room. Beside each door was a small plaque bearing a name. The twenty-fifth door, the one which was supposed to be hers, stood slightly ajar. The plaque beside it was inscribed with the name Rimorn, just as she'd been told it would. Taking a deep breath, she ventured inside.

To say the room was large was an understatement. It was at least the size of the main floor of her house, if not bigger. To the left, nestled in its own nook in the wall, was a massive set of bunk beds made of mahogany. Its thick supports were carved yet were almost worn smooth by the thousands of students who'd slept on them over the years. On the far wall were two full doors with glass, an extravagant expense, which opened out onto a large balcony. With each door came

a set of shutters and a thick bar that would fit in the hooks behind them. Offsetting this were thick curtains, which at the moment were pulled back.

To her right, Talia spotted a majestic stone tub filled almost to the brim with steaming water. She frowned, wondering if someone finished filling it right before she arrived, for she could see no signs of a fire.

Two dressers sat against the wall by the door and perpendicular to them was a generous desk with a stack of unmarked books, several quills, and an inkwell. In a niche close to the balcony doors stood a gorgeous arrangement of flowers. The slot on the opposite side held a miniature water clock and pendulum. Talia stared at the latter in total fascination, not ever having dreamed one could be made so small. If she stood close and listened hard, she could even hear the water as it flowed inside it.

A small, utilitarian vanity sat not far from the beds and held a water-filled basin. Beside it were two buckets stacked inside each other. Next to them was a regular sized door. Opening it, she found a small closet filled with linens, two more buckets, and cleaning implements.

As she looked around, Talia noticed not all the light in the room was coming from outside. High in the walls, she spotted several globes, which seemed to be glowing. She raised her hand toward one but felt no heat emanating from it. Her brow furrowed not knowing such a thing was possible.

Shaking her head, she turned and decided to put her things away. Her meager possessions barely took up two of the available drawers on the first dresser. With the two beds and the extra dresser, she wondered if

she'd be sharing the room with someone. As far as she could tell, however, there was no indication this would be the case.

After she finished, she noticed a bronze plaque set into the back of the room's door as well as a place for another wooden bar. Embossed on the sign were the times for the serving of breakfast, lunch, and dinner, which were at seven, noon, and six. It seemed cold and impersonal.

A pang of longing for her parents and home cut through her. Everything seemed to be so different from what she was used to. Nothing felt familiar anymore. She sighed, suddenly tired. Moving toward the balcony to glance at the sun outside, she made herself stop and look at the clock beside her instead. It was only three o'clock. That was three hours before dinner, three hours on her own. Her stomach took this as its cue to remind her she'd not eaten lunch. With another sigh, she lay down on the lower bed and was almost swallowed by the soft, thick mattress.

She glanced up and didn't see the familiar sight of her room's low rafters or the gentle inside slope of the roof. Instead, she found the carved and scarred surface of the bottom of the bed above her.

Someone had scratched in rough sketches of the school's floor plan in the wood. Each floor was there, even the location of the Administrator's office. It also showed her other essential things like the location of the kitchens and the dining hall. Other students looked to have added other bits of information—class names and times, information she wasn't sure applied to her. Others seemed to have been content just to add their own names or initials almost as if to make sure those



who came after would know they'd been there. As her eyes closed on their own, she wondered where they all were now.





## Chapter 02

THE CHIRPING SINGSONG of a bird startled Talia awake. Realizing she'd inadvertently fell asleep, she scampered out of bed in a panic. What time was it? Did she miss dinner? She glanced at the clock, once she remembered it was there, and saw it was only a quarter past five. Her speeding heart slowed as she realized she hadn't missed another meal after all.

Without slipping back into the bed, lest it lull her back to sleep, she leaned over it and looked up to study the map scrawled there again. Having time, she decided it might not hurt to make sure of where the Administrator's office was as well as where she'd have to go for dinner.

After she made sure their locations were set in her

mind, she braved herself to leave.

The hallway outside was as deserted as it'd been hours ago. If she listened, though, she could still hear the soft hum of voices below her. With quiet steps, she turned right and moved to the stairwell at the far end of the hall. According to the map, a major stairway filled up each of the building's four corners. This one was only slightly smaller than the one she'd used earlier to come up. On the landing to the third floor, she saw the tiles there were of black marble. When she reached the landing for the fourth and final floor, she saw those were colored a sparkling white.

Heading off to the right again, Talia spotted the Administrator's golden door long before she reached it. The door was tall, almost as high as the ceiling. When she got there, she stared up at it. The feeling of being small and insignificant washed over her again. She shivered. Did her parents feel this way when they went for their apprenticeships? She mentally kicked herself, realizing she should have spent her time before coming here asking questions rather than brooding on her unfair fate. Two other doors filled the hallway where the Administrator's office was located. They stood as tall as the Administrator's, but one was made of silver and the other of bronze. As she wondered what they meant, she decided she'd been there long enough and retreated down the nearest set of stairs.

Not far from there, on the first floor, she found the dining hall. The room was huge, extending almost half the length of one of the building's shorter sides. Massive tables filled the room, each lined with heavy benches. Only one table in the room possessed actual chairs, and it was slightly set apart from the others. The

chair at the far end of that table was also somewhat larger than the rest, with gold trim along the top.

As Talia stepped inside, she found the room currently empty, yet muffled sounds echoed inside it from four doors set close at the far end. Trying to remember the map over her bed, she was pretty sure that must be the kitchens. Suddenly, she itched to go over there, to look at the people who worked and lived here up close but didn't dare. Walking between the tables, she picked a place to sit along the back. She wasn't there long before a group of kids about her own age stormed into the room.

She watched as fifteen boys and girls talked animatedly to one another and chose a table somewhere in the middle. She stared somewhat longingly at them but with no real idea of how to approach them. She didn't consider herself to be shy, and many of the people back at Queegam often said she didn't know what the word meant, yet for the first time in her life, she found herself hesitant to introduce herself to strangers. These people were foreign to her in a way none had ever been. She didn't know what she should say or do with them.

As she watched, full of indecision, one of the boys at the table spotted her and pointed her out to a number of the others. Feeling suddenly conspicuous, she looked away, hoping they didn't know she'd been staring.

Next thing she knew, one of the girls was making her way over to her table.

"Hi! My name is Mande." The light-skinned girl gave her a bright smile. "You're new, aren't you?"

"Y-Yes." She couldn't help but gawk, not having seen such curly, red hair before. "My, my name's

Talia."

"Pleased to meet you." Mandeë gave her a light curtsy. "Did you just come in this afternoon?"

Talia nodded. "Yes, with Kel and Clarence."

Mandeë made a face. "Oh, yeah, Clarence. I'm still not over that ride, and it was over six months ago." She laughed. It was an easy sound. "I'll tell you now other dragons don't fly like him. I was actually worried about it for a while." She laughed again. "Say, why don't you come join us? We normally get here a little early, and we've already collected some of the other kids who'll be in your class."

Talia nodded, welcoming the invitation as well as Mandeë's friendly demeanor. "Thanks."

At the other table, introductions passed quickly around. Of the fifteen kids there, she learned three of them were new, the same as her. She found out that each of them had experience as one of Clarence's victims. Mandeë shoved over a couple of the others and got Talia to sit in the middle with her.

"Is Kel a Dragon Knight?" Talia asked.

A couple of the boys laughed out loud.

"No," Mandeë answered, "he's a squire. And he's been one for a long time."

Someone else snickered.

Talia frowned. "Is that a bad thing?"

"Well, once you've got a dragon you're supposed to pass a test together to become an official knight," a girl with dark brown skin and a serious expression explained. "He just can't seem to pass it. So they made him a squire and all he gets to do is run errands on Clarence."

Talia's stomach knotted inside her. She tried to

imagine going through the horrid ride she'd been on day after day; it made her feel ill. She was sure she'd rather be dead. It must be incredibly frustrating for Kel.

More students entered the dining hall. They sat down randomly, some staying as a group with their classmates while others dispersed to mingle with different friends. The room ended up only about half full, but Talia still felt a little overwhelmed. Even during the harvest festivals back home, she'd never seen so many people in one place at one time before.

Men and women from a few years older than the students to too old to tell poured out of the doors from the kitchens, armed with full trays. In droves, they hit each of the tables and deposited dishes, utensils, and large containers of food. The students at each table passed the dishes and utensils along even as the servers came down the table and filled each of their plates with food.

The noise level rose as voices and clanging plates mingled together into a confused din. A rich aroma grew thick in the air.

"You'll need to eat it all," Mande told her. "Especially the vegetables. If you don't, the watchers will get on you and make you do it anyway. And you won't get any dessert. Which would be bad, because you learn to live for those desserts." She giggled. "They say they do it because eating vegetables is good for us. Back home, it didn't matter how much of this or that you ate, but it sure does here. As long as you eat all of what they serve you the first time, then you're allowed to have seconds if you want. If you can stand it, you can even have *thirds*."

Talia stared at her overflowing plate, not sure she'd

be able to eat what she'd been given let alone more. But it did smell and look good. The roast she recognized for what it was, as well as the potatoes and carrots. A couple of the other vegetables on her plate, though, she was pretty sure she'd not seen before. She took small bites of everything to sample them all. A couple of the strange vegetables tasted a little weird to her, but not bad. What she knew, she found thoroughly delicious.

In the end, she surprised herself by eating it all.

She noticed those whom Mandeel called watchers walking quietly between the tables and scrutinizing the students as they ate. Occasionally, she heard a groan or two as one of the watchers would tap a plate with a long wooden spoon, but otherwise, everyone seemed happy and mostly ignored the grown-ups.

"Have you met with the Administrator yet?" Mandeel didn't look at her as she spoke, too busy soaking up her roast's juices with a piece of bread.

"Not yet," Talia replied. "I have an appointment in the morning." The sense of insignificance she'd felt when standing before the Administrator's golden door returned. "What, what is he like?" She hoped the Administrator wouldn't be as overwhelming as his door.

"He's a she." Mandeel's eyes were dancing. "And she's like no one you've ever met before."

The comment didn't make her feel much better. She let her gaze travel across the room to the table on the far side, but couldn't see well enough past the other tables to see if the Administrator was there. When Mandeel added no more information about her, Talia decided to change the subject. "I understand why one might want a bar for the shutters, but why would we need one for the door?"

Yllin, the long-faced, dark-skinned girl sitting to Talia's right, answered the question before Mandeë got a chance to swallow her latest bite. "It's to protect yourself from the peepers."

"Peepers?" Talia stared at the girl beside her in confusion.

Yllin glanced at the boys in their group with distrustful dark eyes before inching a little closer to her, keeping her voice low. "Yes. They're all over the school. They're continually trying to sneak into our rooms, to get a peep at us while we're bathing. You have to be very careful." Her expression was direly serious.

"But, but why would anyone want to do that?" Talia asked in confusion.

"Beats me, but they do. It's a boy thing." Yllin stated it as if it explained everything.

Mandeë leaned over to whisper in Talia's ear. "Some say the old lecher at the cave is the worst one of them all." Her voice held a tone of amusement.

"Some say the old lecher at the cave is the worst one of them all," Yllin said. Mandeë giggled quietly as her words were repeated exactly. "So if you end up having to buy anything from him, watch out."

"Thanks." She didn't know what to make of the information at all.

"Uh oh, they're opening the doors. It's time for our walkies." One of the boys pointed to a set of large doors on the other side of the dining hall. A few of the others who'd eaten too many tarts for dessert groaned out loud.

"Walkies?" Talia asked.

"The watchers make us walk through the garden after every meal." Mandeë stood up, stretching as she



did so. "It's another one of those things they say are good for us."

"It's a total waste of time if you ask me," Yllin said this softly as she looked around to make sure none of the watchers would overhear.

"Well, I enjoy it. It helps my food settle down so I can have more at the next meal." Mandeë grinned. "Especially dessert."

The bunch of them followed the other students as they moved toward the set of doors leading outside. A cobbled walkway wound from there into a lush flower garden filled with trees and bushes. Short stone columns ringed the area, most claimed by roses or vines. About halfway around, Talia noticed the path branched off and seemed to head in the direction of a distant hill.

"The lecher's place is that way. He's got a cave on a cleft in the hill," Yllin said. "If you ever need anything, he's the store master. But if I were you, I'd really make sure I needed it before I went over there to get it." Her deep frown easily conveyed that she'd find very little to be that necessary.

As the path exited the garden, Talia got her first close look at the second large building on the grounds. In many ways, it appeared to be a smaller version of the school but made of wood instead of stone and without the balconies. Two massive doors, currently open, faced the path. Looking to see what she could of the inside, she spotted what appeared to be huge open stalls. A thick covering of straw was strewn everywhere. The barn, for that's what the interior made her think of, looked much too large to hold horses or cattle.

"What is that building for?"

"Oh, that's where the dragons stay," Mandee said. "Clarence is the only one who actually lives there, but it has plenty of room to house any visitors we might get." She pointed off toward the other end of the building. "There's another set of doors on the front. It has a road that winds around to the landing area. There's also a small lake with a natural spring on the other side of the building and a giant pit for their refuse. How they've gotten it not to stink up the area when the wind changes, I just don't know." She smiled as she added the last. "Hey, if you're free, we could show you around. After dinner, our time is our own until lights out at ten."

"Free time after we're done studying you mean. If there's any left before lights out."

"Yllin." Mandee reprovingly shoved the serious girl's shoulder. "Be nice. You've already got her half scared out of her mind, and she's only been here less than a day."

"Oh, sorry, Talia." The other girl sent her an apologetic look.

"I, I don't want to be a bother." Did they really give the students so much work to do? While she didn't want to get the two of them in trouble, she relished even less the thought being alone.

Mandee waved a hand to dismiss her words. "Don't worry about it. You're no such thing. I know this place seems different and maybe even a little weird, if not downright scary, until you get used to it. So if we can do anything to get you acquainted with it, so it's not all quite so awkward, and get you to love it as much as we do, then it's no bother at all." Mandee sent a sly look in Talia's direction. "Despite whatever Yllin may say."

The serious girl humphed in indignation.

Mandee laughed with delight.

"So, what do we study here?" Talia asked.

"Well, to be honest," Yllin confided, "so far it's nothing all that exciting—history, politics, geography, mathematics—mundane stuff. Though you do get to learn a lot about guilds and the choices you can make. And some about dragons, all the different types of dragons."

Most of it seemed to be the same as what they were typically taught back home. It definitely didn't tell her what it was she'd been apprenticed for. "Are there many kinds of dragons?"

"Loads," Yllin answered. "Red, green, blue, black, small, big, some talk, some use their thoughts to speak. It's almost mind-numbing, really."

Talia caught Mandee looking at her excited friend, a small grin on her face.

The path ended at another set of doors, which led back into the school. The watchers who'd come through with them didn't follow much farther.

"Yes! Freedom." Mandee grabbed Talia's hand and pulled her forward. "Come on, it's time for your tour."

"Hey, wait up!" Yllin came running after them.

First Mandee showed her where her room was on the far side of the second floor, then Yllin's on the third. They both explained that as far as they could tell, room assignments were random. Teachers and watchers, however, were interspersed on each floor as well. At the moment, many of the rooms were empty, the school currently at about half capacity. All offices were on the first floor except for the Administrator's, the Treasurer's, and the Taskmaster's. Their offices and

bedrooms were adjoining and located on the fourth floor.

Though Talia learned both Mande and Yllin had only been at the school for six months, they seemed to know a lot about the place. They took her outside to the grounds and showed her the planted fields she'd caught a glimpse of before. Since this time she wasn't clinging onto a dragon for dear life, she was able to study them more critically. This was something she knew a little about. Each square field grew something different, giving Talia the impression the farmers rotated their crops. Corn, wheat, lettuce, and others she easily recognized, though some vegetables she didn't. Each of the fields looked incredibly healthy and abundant—almost amazingly so. She wondered how they did it, and knew her father would give almost anything to find out.

The forest bordering the fields was lush and thick. She saw patches where it appeared some of the trees had been cut down and later replaced with rows of saplings. Her curiosity was piqued as she spotted a couple of trees near the dragon's landing area. These showed torn limbs, and some were cracked, one of them almost in half. Yet it didn't look as if lightning was responsible. "What happened to those trees?"

"Clarence, that's what happened to them." Yllin snorted. "He's a menace. It's a miracle nobody's been killed riding him."

Talia stared at the two trees and could only too easily imagine the dragon careening into them. Was Kel riding him at the time? That was harder to picture. How in the world could he have survived it? She still didn't have any idea how he came out unharmed when the two

of them landed at her home. "Why would they make him ride such a dangerous dragon?"

"They don't."

She stared at Mande in surprise.

For once, the red headed-girl looked somber. "From what I understand, he wants to do it. He wants to pass the test so he can become a full knight, and he wants to do it with Clarence. He practices with him constantly. You can see them flying around all day and half the night when he's not off running errands."

"I bet he's crazy," Yllin added. "Half the older students say so. Clarence probably landed on him one too many times and snapped something loose in here." She tapped the side of her head.

So Kel willingly went through this agony day after day? She shook her head, not able to understand it.

"Come on, we've got more to show you!" Mande waved them on.

Briskly, they followed the road from the dragon landing area and went around the right side of the school to the back. Talia spotted the small, bubbling lake the girls mentioned to her earlier and the tiny river winding away from it, which turned into a waterfall at the end of the mesa. A short distance away was a large pit filled partway with the same dark excrement Clarence left for her parents. Two men were there, scooping some of it onto wheelbarrows. Later, she saw the two men head off back toward the fields. She wondered if it made good fertilizer. She remembered how Clarence told her parents it was worth a lot of money to alchemists. Could excrement have so many uses? She did notice, just as Mande mentioned, that there didn't seem to be much of a smell, unlike when he

used her father's field.

Several poles lined the far edge of the area with globes similar to those in her room. At the moment, however, they weren't lit.

They walked on past the dragon's domicile to the hilly area beyond the garden. Though they didn't get too close, mostly at Yllin's insistence, Mandee pointed out to Talia where the store master's cave was. They didn't linger there long and soon made their way back into the school building.

Inside, they walked around the first floor, and her new friends showed Talia the offices they knew as well as where they went to class. The last thing they went to visit was the immense library on the opposite side of the building from where the dining hall was—and it was almost as big. She stared as they walked past row upon row of books. "Will we have to read them all?" A tone of both wonder and trepidation filled her voice.

Mandee laughed. "Thankfully, no, we won't. Though I'm sure we will need to read some of them. Not all of them are for study anyway." She pointed off to the far back. "The section over there is all legends and stories."

From what she could see of them, Talia noticed those books looked more worn than the rest of the ones in the library. Even now, it seemed to be the area with the most students gathered about.

When they were done there, Yllin and Mandee both asked to see her room. Once they stepped inside, Yllin slipped the bar across the door. If the danger from these "peepers," as she called them, really existed, would it really matter right now since they were fully clothed? Talia decided not to comment on it.

Mandee deftly climbed up onto the higher bunk bed

and bounced on the thick mattress. "Aren't all these rooms great?"

"Definitely bigger than what I had at home," Talia replied. She stared at the ample room around her, still not quite able to believe all this space was hers alone.

"It does have some drawbacks..." Yllin walked over to the tub. "Every week we have to empty the water and fill it up again." She glanced over at Talia. "Not that it ever gets dirty or really gets low." She pointed to the buckets by the water basin. "It's what those are for."

"Yeah, it wouldn't be so bad if we didn't have to drag them all the way from the lake." Mandee sighed. "At least we get to just throw the old water out the balcony." She jumped off the bed.

"But how does the water stay hot?" Talia asked. She noticed wisps of steam still rising from the surface.

Mandee shrugged. "It's magic. They use it a lot around here. So a lot of stuff doesn't work like we're used to."

"I'm pretty sure the whole water thing is just to keep us busy, too," Yllin said glumly, "Because if their magic can keep the water clean and warm, it could keep itself full."

"Oh." Magic—it would explain the lights in her room as well. As with dragons, it was something Talia knew existed, but she'd not been exposed to any of it before. Magic was something for the rich and powerful. Was the guild so well off they could use it on such trivial things?

"We'd better be going," Mandee said. "I have a feeling Yllin and I have filled you with way too much to think about already." She smiled. "See you at breakfast tomorrow?"

Talia nodded. "Yes, that'd be great. Thanks for showing me around." She walked them to the door. Yllin took off the bar.

"No problem. Good night." Mande and Yllin stepped outside and waved as they moved on down the hall.

"Good night." Talia watched them then slowly closed her door.

The room suddenly seemed incredibly quiet except for the barely audible trickling of water from the clock. Though she'd seen earlier the rooms to either side of her were occupied, she could hear nothing through the thick stone walls. At home, though she had her own room, she could typically hear anyone moving about downstairs or the wood of the house creak during a strong wind. It seemed much too quiet here.

Sighing, she walked to the balcony doors and opened them wide. She stepped out, sighed again, then let herself be embraced by the calm darkness there. The moon shone brightly above. Looking to either side, she noticed others were also out on their balconies. It eased her heart a little to see them there.

Unexpectedly, something caught at her attention from the corner of her eye. Talia looked up just in time to see a large shadow cross over the moon. She followed it with her gaze and noticed how it wove up and down in no constant pattern.

Not sure what it was, she leaned over the rail as the object came closer. Trying to look up past the balconies above her as it flew overhead, she jerked back with a gasp as it suddenly dropped past hers toward the ground.

A light scent of oil rushed by with the wind. She



recognized the smell as the shadow rose again, zooming past. Light shone on dark green scales and a figure made of metal. It was Clarence and Kel. Were they both mad? What if Clarence careened into one of the balconies? It was dangerous enough flying a cross-eyed dragon during the day. It was lunacy to do it at night.

As if to accentuate her point, all the lights in the students' rooms went out at the same time. Faint, voiced protests reached her ears as bedtime arrived. Talia forced herself to take deep breaths, her heart still at a gallop in her chest. From what Mande and Yllin said, Kel's and Clarence's practice was a regular occurrence, and from the disappointed sounds of the students so was the dousing of the lights.

Giving the dragon and the squire one last glance, she went back inside and closed the balcony doors behind her. She changed clothes with what moonlight filtered in from the outside then crawled into the strange bed.

Sleep was a long time coming.





## Chapter 03

TALIA WOKE TO the call of birds again. The lilting chirps were high and loud, nothing like the familiar whistles of the red speckled Talerns or even the noisy cacophony of the rooster in the hen house. The call came again and this time was answered by one closer still. She slowly sat up in her bed, glanced out toward the balcony doors, and spotted a bright blue and green bird eyeing her from the rail. It dipped its head as if bidding her good morning then left with a flurry of wings.

She smiled at the greeting but soon sobered. The sun was out, and she had an appointment. In a half panic, she scrambled out of bed to glance at the clock in its niche in the wall. She felt suddenly foolish, as she saw

it was only ten minutes to six. By this time, her mother would already be up, busy preparing breakfast, while her father would be out looking over the fields making his plans for the day.

She wiped at her face as she felt a warm tear trickle down her cheek. She was being silly and she knew it. She'd never thought of herself as the sentimental type before. Just as all the other children in Queegam, she'd known her whole life that sooner or later she would be apprenticed. She just never thought it would be so hard ... Or that she'd miss home so much...

Shaking herself out of her growing sadness, she made the bed then took a bath. Once she'd gotten dressed, it was twelve after six. She wanted to go down to breakfast, but this was too early. She eyed the blank papers and quills at her desk and thought of starting a letter to her parents then put the idea aside, not wanting to run the risk of calling up more tears, especially since she was supposed to attend a meeting with the Administrator this morning.

At six thirty, the globes in her room turned on. Already slightly startled by the unexpected event, she started when someone knocked hard on her door. "Time to rise!"

Talia rushed to her door, but when she opened it no one was there. She looked down the hall and spotted a watcher knocking on a door three down from hers and calling out it was time to rise. The watcher then moved on to the next one.

Since the whole school was being awakened, she decided it would be all right for her to go downstairs. Stepping out into the hall and closing the door to her room, she headed for the nearest flight of steps. She got

a couple of surprised looks from some of the watchers she passed along the way, but they said nothing, so she went on.

The dining hall was empty when she arrived, but the sounds of voices and the rattle of pots and pans echoed softly through the room from an open kitchen door. The smell of baking bread teased her nostrils.

She glanced around then drifted closer to the Administrator's table. She decided on the one closest to it, hoping this time she might be able to catch a glimpse of the woman before she met her later this morning. The strange way in which Mande spoke of her had made Talia a bit more nervous about the coming meeting than she might have been otherwise.

As she waited for Mande and the others to appear, a lone person came into the room from the door leading out into the garden. As she wondered what they'd been doing out there so early in the morning, she realized she knew this person—it was Kel. The squire spotted her at about the same time and waved a greeting to her as he walked toward the open kitchen door. She tentatively waved back.

People were pouring into the dining hall in earnest by the time she saw him come back out of the kitchen. He held a large basket of fruit in one hand and a filled plate in the other. She was a little surprised as she saw him walk over to the Administrator's table and take a seat at the far end. Kel set his things down and started eating, seemingly paying attention to nothing or anyone. She frowned.

"What are you looking at?"

She almost jumped out of her seat at Mande's soft question. She'd been paying so much attention to Kel

she didn't hear her come up. "Ah, nothing." She looked away at the slight lie. "Good morning."

"Morning." Mande sat down next to her. "You sure got here early. I way overslept on my first day." She grinned.

"I—I guess I'm just used to it. We got up early at home every day."

"Not me. At least, not when I could get away with it." Her grin grew into a mischievous smile.

Yllin and a few of the others Talia met the day before joined them. Greetings were passed all around.

As the watchers started serving breakfast, she noticed Kel finishing his. Though some teachers now populated the table, he didn't speak to them other than to trade pleasantries. As soon as he was done, he got up, picked up his basket of fruit and left the dining hall the same way he came in.

"There goes the useless one."

Talia snapped to look behind her. The table next to theirs was filled with mostly older-looking students. A couple of them were chuckling as they stared in Kel's direction, but she couldn't tell who'd voiced the comment. Was this how people really felt about him? Just how long had he been trying to pass his test?

The Administrator's table was soon full, but her chair remained empty. Talia wondered if this was a good thing or not.

As before, the watchers maintained an unobtrusive vigil over the students as they ate. Talia found it hard to put away all she'd been served, though everything was delicious. She felt stuffed as time ran out and they all stood to go for their walk through the garden. She admitted she did feel better by the time they were

through.

"We'll see you at lunch, okay?" Mande said, "We've got to go to class now."

Talia looked at her in surprise as they reached the hallway inside. "Oh." She stared at the two girls as they prepared to go, realizing she'd forgotten they'd be leaving her. It meant she'd have to spend the rest of her time alone before going upstairs for her appointment with the Administrator.

"You'll do fine at your meeting," Mande said, as if reading her mind. "Yllin here made it through, so how bad could it be?" Mande put Talia between her and the grim-faced girl as she spoke, her eyes filled with mirth.

"Hey!" Yllin threw the redhead a dirty look. Then she glanced at Talia. "You can't do any worse than Mande, and they kept her, too." Yllin looked glum, yet a small grin was trying to tug the edge of her mouth.

Mande laughed at her attempt to get her back. "You'll have to tell us all about it when we see you again." She grabbed Yllin's arm. "Come on, sourpuss, or we'll be late."

Talia stepped to the side of the hall, out of the way, and watched them and the other students go past. Once almost everyone was gone, she made her way back to her room. After pacing there for a while, she sat down on her desk and began a letter to her parents. At the moment, she was distracted enough by the coming event that she felt sufficiently disassociated to do it. She felt extraordinarily nervous and skittish. Her stomach knotted inside her, making her wish she'd not eaten breakfast. Still, how bad could this interview be? They wouldn't send her back if she failed, would they?

She set the quill down, unable to write anymore.

She'd heard of such things. It was rare, but it happened on occasion. Once rejected by a guild, it became doubly hard to get accepted by another. Some found they were unable to ever get any training at all. It was people of this sort who became beggars, bandits, and worse. She wouldn't be one of them.

Five minutes before the hour, she left her room and made her way upstairs to the fourth floor. As if she were a condemned criminal on the way to the block, she slowly approached the golden door at the end of the passage. The door towered higher the closer she came, making her feel smaller with each step.

Staring up at it, she finally came to stand before it. Talia took a deep breath, trying to calm herself even as her hand came up to knock on the door. Before she got a chance to do it, however, a soft voice whispered out to her from within.

"Come in. It's not locked."

Her brow furrowed, wondering how in the world the Administrator knew she was there. With a different kind of worry now gnawing at her stomach, she pushed on the door. It gave way to her touch and opened silently before her. She stepped inside.

The room beyond was deep but not wide. A large blue and gold rug covered the cold marble floor, the scent of incense wafting through the air. Three doorways led from the long room, one on the right and two on the left.

"Come on over. I'm back here." The sweet voice came from the second door on the left.

Feeling uneasy, Talia headed in that direction.

The room the second doorway opened into was large. Columns similar to those she'd seen bordering the

garden were set along the walls, a shimmering, sheer azure cloth strung between them. In the center of the room was a big oval tub, with what looked to be the remains of an unusual amount of bubbles. Beyond it, sitting on a long settee, was the woman she'd come to find.

The Administrator looked over at her, reclining comfortably in the settee, a long thick robe covering her from neck to ankles. "Come in, come in. Take a seat. I'm running a little late this morning, but it won't interfere with what you need to do."

She waved Talia over to a chair on the other side of the room.

Tearing her gaze away from the woman, she took a seat. So this was the Administrator. As far as Talia was concerned, she was one of the most beautiful women she'd ever seen. A far cry from what she'd half expected. The Administrator's skin was light with a hint of a tan. Her face was round, with a small nose and full lips. Black, wavy hair was piled on her head to keep it above the soapy water and it accentuated her deep blue eyes. Talia couldn't believe her interview was to be conducted in a bathroom. Surely this wasn't how ordinary people held meetings in the outside world? Then she remembered her encounter with Tammer, and how it didn't go exactly as expected, either.

"My name is Lareen," the Administrator said in the same soft voice Talia heard from the outside the office. "I'm this school's administrator." Lareen changed position, turning on her side to get a better look at her. "Welcome to Dragon's Peak." She gave Talia a warm smile. "I love my job. It has many benefits. For example, no early morning wake-up calls.



Unfortunately, though, sometimes I do have a tendency to oversleep." Her smile turned sly.

Talia felt embarrassed for her. Though from the look of her the Administrator seemed less than bothered by it. Not exactly what she expected from someone in such a high position. Surely she took her job seriously?

"Welcome to my school, Talia. How have you liked it so far?" Lareen's intense blue stare seemed to bore into her.

"Fine, ma'am. It's very nice." She tried her best not to fidget.

"Don't worry," Lareen waved her hand lightly, "you'll get used to everything. Your homesickness will pass before you know it."

Talia stared, wondering how she knew about this. She'd never mentioned it to anyone.

The Administrator moved to sit back as she'd been before. "Our guild is rather extensive. This school is but one of many. Though it's also one of the best." Her tone turned serious. "You'll be here with us for four years then you can either decide to stay for more general training or go to a more specialized school. Unlike most guilds, you have choices on what you want to become. Almost anything is possible here." Her intense stare locked with Talia's own. "Do you have any thoughts on what it is you would prefer to be?"

Talia looked away, caught off guard by the question. She possessed no idea what she wanted to do before her parents took the decision from her and knew no better now. The stories she'd heard didn't really speak of what jobs this guild offered. She assumed the only one they had was to be a Dragon Knight. Wasn't that all they trained for here? "A knight?"

Lareen smiled again. "You have no restrictions here. You can be anything. We require more than just knights. Since our guild is self-sufficient and a government unto ourselves, we need people with skills in all walks of life— farmers, weavers, cooks, even administrators." Her eyes were bright. "We don't have enough dragons for everyone and there exist more challenging roles for some than being a knight."

Talia stared at the floor, more surprised by this than she wanted to admit. So she would still have to make a choice sometime after all. She wasn't sure whether she was relieved by this revelation or not.

"Don't worry, though. If a Dragon Knight is what you want to be, you'll get your chance. Everyone can play the lottery. Until the time comes, you'll learn all manner of things and perhaps see what else is out there which might interest you."

Talia nodded, trying to absorb all she was being told, even as dozens of questions sprang to her mind. She could be anything? How massive was this guild? What was the lottery?

"If you wouldn't mind, would you be a dear and go into the room to the right of this one and bring in the cart that's there?"

"Yes, ma'am." Talia rose immediately and went in search of the cart. She quickly found it, but upon seeing its contents, a whole new slew of questions intruded in her mind.

The cart she pushed back held three tiers. Each of them was full, and their contents were not anything she'd have expected to find in them.

"Ah, yes, that's the one." Lareen waved her closer. "If you would, please go through what's on the top and

pick out the best five you can find."

Talia's mouth opened, but it still took her a second to be able to respond. "Y—yes, ma'am." She turned to look at the contents of the cart's first tier and swallowed hard as she again stared with disbelief at the sparkling gems that filled the shelf to the brim. Never in her life did she think she'd see so many, let alone be asked to pick five of them. Worse, she didn't know anything about precious stones. She hadn't even seen any of any real worth until Kel bestowed some to her parents.

"Take as long as you need to pick them," Lareen said.

"There's no hurry."

Talia couldn't quite bring herself to even touch them.

"Maybe you should dump them out on the floor," the Administrator suggested. "It might make it easier to look through them. You can use the corner over there." She pointed off to the right.

Talia nodded, swallowing hard, then touched the gems. They felt strange to the touch, slick and cool. She handled them gingerly as she set them out on the floor, a little horrified she was being allowed to treat them this way. The gems before her were of every size and color. She didn't even know what half of them were. She was only too aware she didn't have a basis on which to make her choices either. The Administrator wanted her to pick the best five, but she didn't know how to make that determination.

She stared at the treasure before her and tried to think of everything she'd ever heard about precious stones or other valuable things and how they were customarily valued. Talia knew a little about cloth, how the finer the weave, the more expensive it was, but

couldn't quite figure out how she could apply the knowledge here.

Her father, as a hobby, worked with wood. He'd made a lot of the furniture in their home himself and occasionally made a piece or two to sell in town. She'd always thought he was good at it. Every time, before he ever started a project, he carefully checked the wood for rotting, consistency, and cracks. Maybe those criteria would work here as well.

She shrugged her shoulders, not able to think of anything else, and got to work.

Picking up each gem and looking at it carefully, she set aside any which were cracked, chipped, or weren't consistent in color. Of the forty jewels before her, she was able to get rid of ten.

After he gathered the wood, her father would take painstaking care to measure out the lengths he'd need and make sure all the parts would be even when he got done. Keeping this in mind, she looked through the remaining gems and took out any which were cut unevenly or which weren't symmetrical. That got rid of twelve more.

Softly biting her lip, she stared at the gems left before her, trying to find some other way to narrow her choices further.

When her father worked on his projects, she recalled that the ones he took the longest to make or that were made up of the most components usually looked better than those he just speedily threw together. If she remembered right, he got paid more for those, too. Not sure if the same could be said of precious stones, she still set out to separate them with the same idea in mind. She divided the eighteen remaining gems by the

number and shape of their cuts.

Of the eight most intricate of the lot, she picked out five whose colors she liked best.

"Are you done?"

Talia looked up surprised, long ago having forgotten about the Administrator. She quickly nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Let me see." Lareen sounded suddenly eager.

Gathering up her choices, she brought them over to her.

Lareen critically studied the gems in her hands.

"Very well done," she finally remarked. "They're yours to keep."

Talia felt her eyes grow wide. Lareen couldn't be serious. This was a small fortune.

"You'll find some small bags lining the bottom of the top shelf of the cart. Pick one to keep them in."

She hesitated. She just couldn't believe the woman was serious.

The Administrator insisted, waving her on. "Go on."

"Y—yes, ma'am." Talia retreated with her prizes. She was still utterly confused. How could they let her keep these? Everyone knew apprentices were not usually given money of their own. Even if they were, this was just too much.

Almost in a half daze, she studied the small bags that lined the first shelf of the cart. After looking them over, she realized they were all the same size, but their colors were as varied as a field of flowers. She picked a dark blue one to call her own and dropped her prizes inside. Tying the bag shut and latching it on to her belt, she picked up the other gems off the floor and put them back in the cart.

"Let's move over to my bedroom so I can get dressed while you start in on the next shelf." The Administrator stood up from the settee and released her bound hair, combing it as she left the room barefoot. Talia grabbed hold of the cart and set out to follow her. Lareen strolled to the room across the way.

The Administrator's bedroom was twice as large as her bathroom. A spacious, canopied bed dominated the far side, yet the room still didn't look crowded. Two sets of doors led out to separate balconies. As Talia watched, Lareen sauntered over to a marble-topped vanity and sat down before the large mirror. She set down the comb, picked up a brush, and gently stroked it through her cascading hair.

"You'll find some papers on the second shelf of the cart. I want you to read through them then tell me which of them would be the most useful." Lareen glanced at her in the mirror's reflection.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Why don't you make yourself comfortable and use the chair back there?" Lareen pointed toward the corner of the room closest to the door where a bulky but well-padded chair and a small table sat nestled.

Talia steered the cart in that direction and sat down. Gingerly, she pulled out the four sets of parchments in the cart and set them on the table. Noticing the Administrator was paying her no attention whatsoever, she pushed herself farther back on the comfortable chair and opened the first parchment.

Within, she found what looked to be a list of everyday items—rope, hoses, eggs, chickens. It also listed their weights, quantities, and prices. The list was quite extensive, almost ten pages worth. She read

through all the items, unsure whether something important might be hidden within.

She didn't find anything.

After looking through the list a second time, she rolled it back up, set it aside, and moved on to the next.

The new parchment contained a long poem. It was simple, the rhymes not well thought out, but it was amusing. The poem told of how the sun learned of the beautiful moon by the gossip of the clouds. He then went on to spend his every waking moment trying to see her for himself. This could not be, of course, since the moon would only show herself once he'd gone from the sky. The sun, however, kept on, and on, oblivious.

Talia was forced to put her hand over her mouth several times as she read through the poem to keep from laughing out loud.

"Say, which one of these do you think I should wear today?"

She glanced up and found Lareen standing before a long dresser holding up four brightly colored and strangely cut clothes. Talia frowned, not having seen the like before.

"Uh, ah, I'm not really sure, ma'am."

"Oh well, never mind." Lareen put the clothes back then pulled out others which looked even stranger than the first.

Wondering what that was about, Talia rolled up the poem and reached for the third parchment.

The next one was sixteen pages long. Though it was written in a somewhat winded and dry style, she still found herself instantly fascinated. The contents went into some detail about the proper daily maintenance of dragons. A section was even devoted to the likes and

dislikes of the different colored types. She was surprised at the number of distinct varieties. The paper only listed eight but suggested there were more.

A point of interest, common to all types, was their almost compulsive love of cherries. If the pits were left in them, the fruit even tended to have an intoxicating effect. Bold lettering strongly proclaimed though that if they were given too many pits, it could prove dangerous for the dragon. While small quantities were inebriating, large amounts were poisonous.

Cherries were poisonous?

The last section of the parchment dealt with a common vermin to dragons called worms. From what the paper said, it seemed these worms worked to get underneath a dragon's scales and latch on to the skin beneath. While the parasite was mostly an annoyance to the dragon, the parchment said they could be dangerous to a rider. It didn't tell how, although it did go to some length to explain the steps for their proper removal. Talia never heard of such a creature before, though now one of Kel's references when he first picked her up made sense. She wasn't sure she wanted to know more, though.

Talia glanced up to see what Lareen was doing before going on to the last parchment in the cart. She spotted the Administrator looking in her direction. The robe was gone, replaced by a frilly red dress of gossamer material, which accentuated certain parts of her and didn't look overtly utilitarian. This was how the top person in a school dressed?

"Do you like it?" Lareen came closer and twirled before her so she could see all of it. Talia was hard-pressed to say anything, though Lareen did look



beautiful in it.

"Hmm." Lareen pouted lightly. "Maybe it's not quite right for today. Oh, well. Carry on." The Administrator went back across the room and pulled out other dresses as thoroughly inappropriate and strange as the first before disappearing behind a high set of screens to change.

Talia forced herself to stop watching her and grabbed the last of the parchments.

This was the thickest of all—over thirty pages long. Unlike the previous one, however, it was written simply and was easy to read. It was a story of a Dragon Knight.

The whole tale was fun and exciting, though it seemed to be lacking in substance. The knight in the story was very busy—he was off saving princesses, slaying monsters, and doing other courageous deeds. Yet the descriptions in the story were vague and didn't impart much of anything. It did have a good ending though—he married the most beautiful princess he'd rescued and got his own kingdom. She doubted anyone could ask for more.

When she finished with the last and set it down, she found Lareen sitting quietly on her bed staring at her. "Finished?"

"Yes, ma'am." Talia noticed, with some amusement, that the Administrator was wearing the same red dress she'd initially put on.

"Which of them do you choose?" Lareen asked. "Or do you need more time?" She lay down on her side on the bed, in no way appearing as if she was in a hurry.

"No, I ... I've made my decision." Talia took the parchment on dragon maintenance.

Lareen's brow rose on her lovely face. "That one?"

Why not the first?"

The Administrator's seeming amazement at her choice surprised Talia. Her mind stumbled to come up with an explanation even as a small part of her now doubted her decision. "The, the list is nice and is made up of useful things, but other than to maybe be used for figuring out the general weight of things, you can't really use it. Though it has prices on it, there's no way to tell whose prices they are so the information is worthless." She hoped she didn't sound as unsure as she felt.

Lareen nodded. "And the poem?"

"It was funny. But other than possibly cheering someone up it has no real use." Her stomach knotted as the notion occurred to her that Lareen might have written it.

"Hmm, and the story?"

Talia forced herself to take a breath and plunged on.

"Entertaining, but lacks any real information."

"All right, then why did you pick the one you did?"

Lareen asked, her eyes bright.

She looked away from the woman's suddenly intense stare. "Well, it has good, practical information. Things which as a guild member I could use." She tried to come up with more to say, but her brain wasn't cooperating. She hoped it would be enough.

"Keep it then. I think you'll definitely find it helpful."

Lareen rose from the bed. "Let's go on over to my office. Bring the cart, won't you?" Her colorful skirt rustled as she crossed the room. Talia picked up the other parchments, dumped them into the cart and, tucking the one she was to keep inside her vest, rushed

to follow.

The Administrator's office was the door closest to the golden door. A large, abused looking desk sat prominently in the back. Papers lay in neat stacks on one side of it. Lareen waved her toward the three padded chairs facing it.

Talia rolled the cart to the closest one and sat down.

"If you'll look at the last shelf on the cart, you'll find a nice assortment of knives there. Look through them and find one you like. Sheaths for them are in the drawer beneath it." As she spoke, Lareen sat down and picked up one of the stacks of papers.

"Yes, ma'am."

The last shelf of the cart held thirty-two knives in all.

Some were made of silver, others of bone, some even of gold. Some held long blades; others were curved like snakes. Just as she'd done with the gems, she took all of them out of the cart and spread them before her. At least this was something she knew a little about.

Without much thought, she set aside the strangely curved blades and those made of precious metals. The curved knives would be too awkward for her to handle and the others were either made of a metal which would be too soft to prove useful for anything but decoration or would tarnish too easily. The blacksmith's son, Lir, taught her these things even as he learned them. Unlike her, Lir knew all along what he wanted to be. He, too, would be apprenticed to a guild soon.

She wished he were here with her now.

Telling herself she had no right to think such things, Talia studied the eleven blades left. One by one, she picked them up and tested their balance and weight as

well as how they felt in her hand. She put three of these swiftly off on the rejected pile. After several more minutes, she finally settled on a thin, double-edged knife with a leather grip. She very much enjoyed the comfortable fit of the grip in her hand. The blade was also light, possessed good balance, and appeared to be able to take some amount of abuse.

She placed all the other knives back in the cart, then opened the drawer beneath and sifted through the sheaths there until she found one that would handle her blade.

Once done, she stood up and glanced at Lareen, wondering what the Administrator would want her to do next. The fact she was being tested was obvious, but what the results of the tests would be used for she wasn't so sure. Lareen was still at her desk, busily writing, her eyes moving over other papers set before her. Her round face was set and focused, almost as if she were a different person from the carefree one Talia met not long before.

Before she could decide if she should interrupt her, the Administrator looked up as if sensing her stare. "All done?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

Lareen beckoned her over. "Let me see what you picked."

Talia brought over the sheathed blade and handed it to her. Her eyes glanced down at the papers on Lareen's desk and she noticed the neat handwriting on the documents. One of them contained her name at the top. She was about to try and see what it said about her when Lareen spoke. "Very nice choice. You've done quite well." The Administrator's smile was warm.

Talia guiltily looked away from the papers. "Thank you." A knock reverberated into the room from the hallway. Lareen glanced in that direction. "Ah, lunch is here. Perfect timing." She gave her back her knife. "Would you mind getting the door?"

Talia nodded, amazed so much time had gone by. To her surprise, she saw the overwhelming door wasn't gold on the inside but a dark wood with steel reinforced supports. She went ahead and opened it.

A severe-faced, middle-aged woman nodded at her as she wheeled in a cart full of food. Her hair was cut very short and was colored black and gray. The woman immediately headed toward the Administrator's office. Talia closed the door and followed.

"Ah, thank you, Tula. Your timing is as impeccable as ever." Lareen rose from her desk.

The scent of roasted pork and a tangy sauce swirled in the air making Talia's stomach rumble in expectation.

"Tula, meet Talia, our newest recruit," Lareen said.

"Pleased to meet you." The newcomer's accent was thick.

"Tula is our head cook. She rules the kitchen with an iron fist." Lareen smiled as she spoke. "She has many talents."

"Don't listen to her, child. She's just trying to flatter me to get more dessert." Tula's blue-gray eyes suddenly twinkled, brightening her face perceptively.

"Pleased to meet you, too, ma'am," Talia said.

"None of that, please. I'm nobody's ma'am, just Tula." The head cook started uncovering the dishes on the cart.

Lareen brought over a small table and lifted two wings on its sides to make it larger. Talia jumped in to

help and brought over a couple of chairs for them to sit on.

Tula served them both, making sure both their plates held plenty of vegetables and meat before taking her leave.

Lareen poured them cups of watered wine. "This is to celebrate your addition to the guild." She raised her cup high. After a moment, Talia rushed to follow suit. "Congratulations and welcome." Lareen beamed. Talia tried her best to return her smile, feeling suddenly a little overwhelmed and awkward.

"The rest of your class will be arriving over the next week. Until then, your time will be your own," Lareen said. "Since you have money now, you might want to visit Nertak's store. It's located in a cave in the back of the grounds. I'm not sure how much you actually brought with you, but if you need anything, you should be able to find it there. If he doesn't have it, he can order it for you."

Talia nodded. She wondered if the Administrator knew what rumors were being spread about this man.

"He can also take care of any mail you might need to send." Lareen stared at her knowingly. Talia honestly didn't know what to make of her.

"Your group's teacher will be Helyn. She will probably introduce herself to you sometime before your classes officially begin."

As they ate, Lareen added little pieces of information to the meal. The building and the school it housed had stood for over eight hundred years. Over time, the rooms were given the names of knights who'd studied there and gone on to gain great fame. Lareen told her she was only one of a long line of administrators at

Dragon's Peak and had cared for the school for the last five years. The school was one of six teaching general, rudimentary skills. Specific schools for particular lines of work were seeded throughout the world.

"School is six days a week. The seventh day is your own, but part of it is to go toward the changing of the water in your tub and the linen on the beds," Lareen told her. "There's a bag in your closet for laundry. You just put what needs to be cleaned in there and set it out in the hallway on the way to breakfast. You should find it returned by the next day." Talia tried to commit all this to memory.

"Do you have any questions?"

Talia sat back and seriously considered if she should ask anything. Yet one of her many questions from earlier came up to the fore. "What is the lottery?"

"Ah." Lareen appeared intrigued by her choice of question. "It's a process we use to assign a knight to a dragon. Every year we have more people than there are dragons available. With the lottery, those who want to participate choose the color dragon best suited to their personality then numbers are drawn to see who actually will be paired."

"Is it how Kel got Clarence?" She inhaled quickly, not sure if she'd stepped out of line in asking this. She saw Lareen's brow rise.

"Well, as you've seen, Clarence does have a certain flying disability. Though he's spent quite a long time with the guild, he wasn't normally included as part of the lottery—this was his choice. After Kel won his draw, he specifically requested Clarence. Since Clarence agreed to it, it was done." Lareen sighed, a wistful look crossing her face.

"Unfortunately, to become a full knight, the rider and dragon must pass a final test once they've bonded. Though expectations were high some of Clarence's deficiencies would be overcome once he and Kel joined, it wasn't the case—and so the final test proved beyond them."

Talia nodded, Lareen's words explaining a lot. She now understood where some of the jeers came from. But why would Kel have chosen Clarence in the first place? Surely both of them were aware there'd be a chance the idea wouldn't work. How would Clarence's deficiencies have been overcome by this anyway? Was there more to the bonding than just getting to know each other?

"You'll learn more about all this in your classes," Lareen went on. "But there is one point I need to make. Dragons are not beasts of burden or just mounts, though I'm sure at times they might seem that way." The Administrator's gaze caught her own. "They're our *partners*. Their time with us is a kind of apprenticeship for them. They are as smart if not smarter than humans and have the wisdom of long lives. Our partnerships are beneficial to both sides. Don't ever make the mistake of thinking of them as nothing more than winged horses. They care, they think, they feel. Their bodies are different, but inside we're very much alike."

At Lareen's words, Talia found herself feeling guilty. She'd already committed the mistake. Though Clarence spoke to her when they first met, she had still just thought of him as Kel's mount—she'd thought Kel was the only one who was miserable. How much worse was it actually for Clarence? He was the one with the deficiency; he was the one who wasn't thought of as a



real dragon in the first place.

"Any other questions?"

She couldn't bring herself to ask another.

"Well," Lareen said, "if you come up with anything else, just ask any watcher or teacher. They'll be happy to help. And I'm always available, of course." The Administrator gave her a warm smile. "One more thing though—I would appreciate it if you kept all details about this meeting to yourself where any of the other new students are concerned.

"It wouldn't be fair to you or the others if they came to see me knowing what to expect." Her eyes held a mischievous glint.

"Yes, ma'am." Talia nodded, not entirely understanding.

Lareen stood up and came around to her side.

"Unfortunately, I've got work to do, so I'm going to have to shoo you out now." She led her to the main door. "Enjoy your time off before the work begins in earnest. I think you'll make a nice addition to the guild." Lareen gave her a big smile before shutting the golden door and leaving her alone in the hallway.



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## About the Author

Gloria Oliver lives in Texas making sure to stay away from rolling tumbleweeds while bowing to the never-ending wishes of her feline and canine masters. She works full time shoveling numbers around for an oil & gas company and squeezes in some writing time when she can.

Due for release in 2019 is “Alien Redemption.” This is Gloria’s first science fiction novel. This is also her eighth book to see publication. Her previous works have been fantasy, urban fantasy, and young adult fantasy novels. Several contain romantic and mystery elements. Her short stories of speculative fiction can be found in all manner of anthologies, covering things from the fantastic and strange to a Bubba Apocalypse.

Gloria is a member in good standing of BroadUniverse though she has yet to make the list for Cat Slaves R Us.

For some free reads, novel related short stories, sample chapters, appearance schedules and more information on her and her works, please drop by and visit her at [www.gloriaoliver.com](http://www.gloriaoliver.com)

## In the Service of Samurai

### CHAPTER 1

The sun dipped beneath the horizon, taking with it the last light of the day. Toshi crouched a little lower over his workbench as the light faded, knowing his master wouldn't want the lamps lit while a moment of daylight still remained.

Bought from his family while he was very young, he knew his master's ways well. Just as Master Shun didn't want any money wasted unnecessarily, he also precluded spending it on unneeded frivolities. Toshi ran his hand over his black hair, fingering the old, thin, stretched tie holding it in a ponytail. Though the last few months had seen a growth spurt for him, he knew he would not be receiving a new pair of knee-reaching breeches or a loose-fitting tunic for several moons yet.

Still, he was well-fed, and the skills he was learning would earn a better living than some. Aside from his not-so-common profession, he was the same as hundreds of others, a boy with the usual dark hair, brown eyes, slightly tinted skin, and almond-shaped eyes—characteristics which made it virtually impossible for a foreigner to pass as a native.

With precision gained from long practice, his brush slid smoothly over the thick rice paper as he diligently copied the curving meridian lines from the yellowing foreign parchment pinned on the desk beside him.

As he squinted, he dipped his brush in the small reservoir of ink built into the desk. Gently twirling the brush on the bowl's long lip, he bled off any excess. His steady hand guided the brush in another slow curve, marking the outline of his map. His attention didn't waver from the delicate work, even as he heard the shop's front door slide open.

"If you would please wait a moment, O-kyaku-sama, I'll be right with you," he said.

At an unhurried pace, Toshi came toward the end of his

curving line. An unusually cool breeze made its way through the long shop, carrying with it the heavy scent of the sea. Like most shops in town, theirs was comprised of two stories, one in which to conduct business, the other for sleeping and eating. Master Shun believed in cleanliness, so a day did not pass during which Toshi didn't have to sweep the entrance or run a wet cloth across the floorboards. On days when it rained and prospective customers tracked in the mud with them, it was all he could do to keep up.

A large counter took up the left side of the front of the shop, while the rear held the working desk and wall-to-wall niches to hold their wares.

He rubbed his suddenly cold feet together, wondering why the customer hadn't bothered to close the door. His gaze snapped up as he realized the customer did shut the paper screen door, remembering the soft wood on wood sound as it had slid closed.

Yet the scent of salt and seaweed still crowded into his nostrils. It was strange the smell had come so far and was so strong since the shop was a distance from the port. Dismissing the oddity as he heard the late customer moving about, he set his brush carefully aside.

"O-kyaku-sama, I've finished." He bowed in the general direction of the visitor out of long-ingrained habit though he couldn't see him. "I apologize for the wait. How may I help you?"

He glanced at the shadow-enshrouded figure on the far side of the room, just as the last of the sun's light dwindled away. He quickly left the side of his workbench and its wooden platform. A small, unexplained chill coursed through him as the customer's ever deepening shadow came to loom over him. "Sir?"

He didn't receive an answer. Realizing Master Shun wasn't likely to make a sale if his customer remained in the dark, he shifted past the familiar surroundings and reached for the nearest paper lantern.

"I'll have some light for us in a moment, sir. I apologize for it being so dark." He removed the paper covering of the lamp and exposed the candle inside.

"Where's your master, boy?"

The unexpected voice made him jump. Though the customer was standing less than five arm lengths from him, the low, monotone voice sounded as if it had been issued from far away. Toshi glanced up to answer, but he hesitated as he saw a flash of greenish light issue from somewhere around the customer's face.

He rubbed at his eyes, feeling foolish, even as a tinge of unreasonable fear tried to crowd into his mind. Realizing his continued silence could be misunderstood as rudeness, he turned away from the figure and answered the question. At the same time, he reached to light the lamp. "Master Shun wasn't feeling well today, sir. He retired early. If you wish, you could leave a message for him. I'm sure he'll be feeling better tomorrow."

Warmth tickled his fingers as the wick caught fire. He placed the oval paper covering back over the candle. Its light gently spread over the room. He then carried the lantern to the main counter in the front of the shop, and turned to get his first good look at the waiting customer.

The man was facing away from him, so Toshi's gaze landed upon well cared for armor with its small steel plates hooked on lacquered leather. He wasn't surprised by what he saw, having already figured from the harsh and emotionless tone his customer was samurai—an elite, upper-class warrior.

Dressed as if for battle, the samurai wore the commanding rounded helmet with protruding strips of plate to guard the back of the neck. Fitted back plates and metal shoulder pads were attached to the toughened leather that made up the sleeves and the lower skirt. Strapped-on leather tubes protected the warrior's legs.

No, what made his eyes grow wide and his heart beat faster were the long tufts of wet seaweed hanging from the

armor. Droplets of water reflected the lamp's light as they fell from the armor and the soaked clothes beneath to make a small puddle on the floor. His eyes followed the water trail leading from the samurai's feet back to the front door, his throat growing dry.

He took an unsteady step back, not sure what it all meant. His gaze traveled back to the armor and looked at the family crest painted there. The crest showed three white crescent moons facing each other within a thin circle. He didn't immediately recognize it. It wasn't one belonging to any of the prominent samurai families in town. Perhaps the man was a ronin, a masterless samurai, but the good condition of his armor and his kimono suggested otherwise.

Toshi watched with growing curiosity as the samurai slowly turned about to face him. His breath caught in his throat as a demonic scowl stared him in the face. He tried to still his racing heart as he realized the evil, horrifying expression before him was but a mask clipped to the front of the samurai's helmet, hiding the man's true face.

Taking another step back, he forced his eyes to leave the mask. Why would a samurai in full battle regalia come here to see Master Shun? He wondered what time it was and when the city watch would be coming by. Ever since the foreigners, the gaijin, had been allowed entry into the ports and even certain regions of the city itself, the curfews and patrols had become more stringent than before. If he ran out to look for them, would they cut him down before he could explain why he had broken curfew? Or worse, would he even make it out of the store if he decided to try?

His eyes fixed themselves on the sheathed swords, the long katana and shorter wakizashi, hanging from the samurai's side. He wasn't sure he could run past the strange customer to get help before the warrior could draw either blade and make its razor sharpness cut through his hide.

Glancing up into the warrior's masked face, he froze. He had seen it again—a flash of greenish light in the eye slits of

the mask! Excitement and fear clutched at his breast and a thin sheen of perspiration rose on his brow. He stared hard at the samurai's metal mask, noticing for the first time how dark the area beyond the eye slits were and how the brown eyes that should have been there staring back at him were nowhere in sight.

"Sir, it...it's time for the shop to close. Is there a message you wish me to convey to Master Shun?" He tried not to look at the snarling, demonic mask, though his eyes were drawn toward the unnatural emptiness of its eye slits.

"Can you read gaijin maps, boy?"

Toshi felt surprised rush through him at the totally unexpected question.

"Yes, sir. A little. My...my master has had dealings with a number of gaijin to try to learn their ways of making and reading maps. I have studied this with him."

He hadn't meant to say so much. He didn't want to deal with the strange samurai. That was Master Shun's responsibility, but his frightened tongue hadn't known when to stop. With a long, silent shiver, he wished his master would come downstairs right then, even if it meant he would get a flogging.

"Do you have maps for the area with the chain of islands just to the north of here?"

The samurai's distant monotone slammed into him even as he tried to figure out what he should do. When he didn't immediately answer, the seaweed-covered samurai took a long step forward. Toshi took one back.

"Well, boy?" the samurai asked. His impatience was unmistakable; his voice sounded like it came from a deep well.

Not wanting the samurai to come any closer, Toshi tried to answer his question as quickly as possible.

"Yes, sir, we have many maps."

"Show me."

He scurried away to the shop's rear. Against the wall, on



the right, racks of small square-shaped shelves were stacked upon each other almost to the ceiling. Ruffling through the carefully rolled parchments in a number of the squares, he grabbed what he was looking for and walked cautiously around the samurai to stand behind the safety of the shop's front counter. He laid the rolled parchment on the end of the counter closest to the unusual customer then backed away from it.

Without a word, the samurai stepped forward. Toshi watched as the man raised his arm to reach for the map. Filled with a bolt of sudden fear, he jumped back, smashing his head against one of the shop's wooden support beams as the hand he expected to see reaching for the map never appeared. With spots of color flying before his eyes, he stared in paralyzed horror as fleshless fingers reached instead to claim the waiting map.

"You're *obake*. A monster!" The boy clamped his hands over his mouth as he realized the accusing words were his. He stared at the samurai in cold terror, sure his words would be the end of him.

The samurai ignored him.

As his death didn't immediately manifest, Toshi's eyes shrank back to normal. He made no attempt, though, to remove his hands from his mouth. With dread-filled fascination, he watched the samurai's fleshless hand as the creature took the rolled map and, with another equally bare, undid the string holding it together. He observed the skeletal fingers as they spread the map out over the top of the counter.

All the old stories were true. Demons did walk the earth. But why was this demon here? He and Master Shun had done all Shinto prescribed in order to keep themselves out of the reach of evil or mischievous spirits.

Shinto—The Way of the Gods—made them aware of the spirits that inhabited every rock, tree, and mountain, and which spirits were best avoided and how. The two of them

had exorcized the shop and its living quarters above on New Year's as they did every year, driving the evil spirits out and good luck in. They'd gone to the temple and made the prescribed offerings. The prayer strips were all in place. Had the gods decided not to protect them? What had Master Shun done to bring such evil to this place?

The samurai's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Are all known reefs and other hazards of the area contained within this map?"

Toshi nodded rapidly, his hands still clamped over his mouth. He tried crawling back into the beam behind him as the samurai's empty stare turned toward him, a flash of eerie green light momentarily filling the mask's slits. Sweat poured down the side of his face as he realized with a start the samurai hadn't seen his nod and was therefore still waiting for his answer. He forced his hands to move away from his mouth.

"Y-yes, sir." He could barely keep his words from stumbling over each other. "It's...it's all there, as far as I know. Master Shun has spent a lot of money getting the gaijin to help him make accurate maps."

He clamped his hands over his mouth again, knowing he'd just told more than he liked. The samurai's stare shifted away from him back to the map.

"You can read this map? The numbers, the words?"

Toshi hesitated a long moment before nodding when the samurai's eyes turned toward him again.

"Could you guide someone with it if you had the gaijin instruments?" he asked.

Toshi stared at the samurai, caught off-guard by the question. Should he lie? Very few people got the opportunity to meet gaijin, let alone learn their ways. The demon couldn't possibly know the gaijin merchant they'd contracted had taught him a lot more than required. Even Master Shun didn't know how much he'd learned. Despite being a demon, the samurai wouldn't sense a lie, would he?

“Well?”

The deep voice didn't sound happy to be kept waiting. Green fire flared in the snarling mask's eyes, and Toshi knew he couldn't take the risk. Although he had a horrible feeling he would regret his truthfulness, he nodded.

“Fetch me paper, ink, and brush.”

He cringed against the wall, not understanding the reason for the request.

“Move!” The samurai's fleshless hand dropped to the hilt of his katana.

Driven by the commanding tone as well as the unspoken threat, Toshi bolted to the back of the store. Searching for the items requested, he hurried back, the skin on the nape of his neck prickling as he noticed the samurai stood between him and the door.

He almost dropped the wooden ink well on the counter as he tried to put the requested items down. Laying all the supplies within the samurai's reach, he scurried back to stand against his wooden beam.

The skeletal hand reached out and expertly took hold of the thin, longhandled brush. With frightened eyes, Toshi noted as each of the delicate bones in the hand moved with careless grace. Goosebumps covered his arms and back as he saw there was nothing holding them together.

With elegant fluidity, the samurai inked the brush and began to write. Despite himself, Toshi appreciated the evenness of the samurai's strokes. The writing was very clear, and he had no trouble understanding it despite the fact it was upside down to him. With morbid curiosity, he found himself reading the message the samurai was writing for Master Shun. Literacy had been one of the few unexpected gifts he'd gained since being sold as an apprentice.

His face drained of color as he realized the meaning of what he was reading.

“No! Sir, please don't do this,” he pleaded. “Master Shun doesn't want to sell me. I've been his apprentice for too

many years. You mustn't do this, sir. You mustn't do this!"

Fear overwhelming his sense, he leaped forward to grab the offensive piece of paper. Before his fingers could even brush its surface, the samurai's bony hand lashed out and caught his wrist.

Toshi stared in desperation at the glowing eye slits as an unearthly cold spread into his arm from the samurai's fleshless hand. The cold moved through him like a living thing, paralyzing him where he stood.

Never loosening his hold on the boy's arm, the samurai returned to completing his message.

As the grisly metal face looked elsewhere, Toshi found his eyes and numbed mind free again. He tried to scream so he could wake up Master Shun or attract the watch—anything that might get him away from this demon, but his vocal cords were as frozen as the rest of him.

He read the note again and again, noticing as the samurai finished that it lacked a signature. Who was this demon? Studying the family crest again, he thought he might have seen it somewhere before. Was it important?

The samurai reached inside and produced a hand-sized silk sack from within the lacquered armor. The jingle of coins echoed through the room as the samurai let the sack drop on the counter. He then reached into a small bag at his side and brought out a long bamboo tube. He carefully rolled up the map and placed it inside. Returning the tube to the bag, the samurai turned his burning green eyes in Toshi's direction.

"Come."

The intense cold that had kept him rooted to the spot lessened. Toshi walked hesitantly around the counter, the samurai pulling on his wrist.

His worried gaze swept around the shop, a heavy feeling in the pit of his stomach telling him this would be the last time he'd ever see the place he'd called home since he was six. With an overwhelming sense of loss, of leaving all he

had ever known, he stopped and planted his feet on the floor, not willing to let it all go so easily.

Without looking back, the samurai yanked his arm, pitching him forward. Landing hard on his knees, Toshi felt his eyes fill with pain-induced tears as the samurai then dragged him toward the door. The snarling mask with its glowing eyes glared at him without the slightest sign of pity or mercy.

With a soft whoosh, the samurai slid open the shop's paneled front door and wrenched him to his feet.

"Now walk." The samurai's free hand landed on his sword's hilt once more, reminding the boy of its silent but deadly threat.

Toshi looked away, hating the way he felt as he realized he had no choice. He slipped on his old sandals, sitting just outside the store entrance, and stepped out of his old life forever.

Keeping his gaze on the dirt road, he followed as the samurai set an easy pace away from the shop. As they walked, a thin fog sprang up around them. Toshi shivered, cold inside and out.

All he was being forced to leave behind flashed through his mind—Master Shun, quirky and strange though he was; the Kawa family next door and their gaggle of children; the sweet dumplings he always bought during festival nights from the old woman near the temple; his room and his few possessions; the friends he'd made from the gaijin ship. His heart ached.

Very few lights were on in the bottom floors of the many two-storied buildings surrounding them on either side. A number of the lights in the living quarters on the second floor had already gone dark as well. Only the howling wind and the lonely howl of a stray dog disturbed the silence as he was led down the street in the direction of the docks.

The scent of the demon's clinging seaweed wrapped about Toshi as they walked. He shuddered despite the warm

night breeze as the samurai strolled on as if he were lord of everything around him. Toshi refused to look at him, to look at the monster that was ripping him away from all he knew.

The buildings changed as they approached the docks. The wood-and-paper homes grew smaller as they crowded in side-by-side. The wail of a hungry child or a quiet, lonely moan occasionally escaped into the street, the smell of human waste and rotting garbage growing ever thicker. The samurai appeared to be oblivious to it all, yet for Toshi, these scents and sounds only too sharply expressed the despair and unfairness welling up inside him.

At last, he slipped a hateful glance at the samurai. Of course, it wouldn't bother a demon if there was suffering and misery in the world or that he was about to add to it. After all, wasn't that what demons were for?

He quickly wiped at the tears threatening his eyes, determined not to show any weakness to this demon. Although he hoped for it with every step, the samurai's cold grip never lessened on his wrist. If he could only get a chance to try to escape!

With unbelieving eyes, as they crossed the last street intersection before the docks he spotted two samurai of the watch. Hope sprang in his heart, and he tried to scream for their attention as the demon pulled him across the street. Yet although he tried and tried, no sound made it past his lips. The two men continued walking as he felt his last chance for freedom being swept away by fate.

While his soul wailed with despair, his eyes lighted on a rock on the dirt road less than two feet in front of him. He felt an urge to look at the demon beside him, to make sure he hadn't seen the rock. He forced himself to curb the impulse and kept his gaze glued to his one possible means of salvation.

Leaving himself no time for thought, he dropped to the ground and swung one of his legs hard, tripping the samurai. The armored figure fell.

Toshi lunged for the rock. Gasping, he felt the bitter cold from the fleshless hand that still held him pour greedily into his bones. He couldn't feel the rock as he wrapped his fingers around it. His body slowed as he fought with every ounce of his being to lift his arm so he could throw the stone to try and gain the attention of the watch.

Perspiration broke out all over his body from the effort as the flowing cold pierced him to the core. With a silent scream, he watched the two samurai disappear from sight as his raised arm froze at the top of the throwing arc.

Hot pain blossomed on the side of his face. Unable to move, he couldn't stop himself from toppling onto the dirt, the samurai's blow knocking him off his feet. A whispered hiss fell on his ear as his vision swam.

"Fool."

He would have cringed from the scorn in the samurai's voice, but he couldn't even do that. A hard yank brought him to his knees. He tried his best to ignore the grotesque mask and the glowing eyes before him.

"If you find someone willing to try to stop me from taking you, I'll kill them. Their death will be on your head."

The samurai's voice was cold. Toshi looked away. He knew the demon would do what he threatened.

Another rough yank brought him to his feet. He gasped in pain at the hard pull, the rock he had risked so much to grab falling forgotten from numb fingers. The samurai's words continued to reverberate in his mind as he was dragged forward once again.

Why would a demon be willing to kill to keep him? Why then pay Master Shun instead of just stealing him away? This wasn't the way demons did things.

Toshi offered no more resistance as the samurai pulled him onto the platform for the docks. He kept looking back, however, trying hard to engrave the memory of the home he was being torn from in his mind. He wiped at his face with his sleeve, his eyes burning.

The majority of the boats tied close to them were long and flat-bottomed, most of them fishing boats. On the dock's far side were the gaijin ships. Their tall masts and swollen bodies dwarfed all the other boats around them.

The samurai paid him no attention as he pulled him along and strolled down each of the platforms, gazing at all the ships gathered there. After several minutes, they came across a fishing boat with a small skiff tied to its side. Toshi was dragged toward it, and he wondered what the samurai was planning.

Moving through the fishing boat toward the single-oared dory, the samurai left three coins wrapped artistically in paper next to the ship's tiller. Toshi's eyes strayed to the small bundle, puzzled by the fact the coins had been prepared as a gift. It then dawned on him what they were being left for. His brow furrowed. Why would a demon have need of a skiff?

With his one free hand, the samurai pulled on the rope tied to the small craft and drew it closer to them.

"Get in." Flashing green eyes turned in Toshi's direction with the barked command.

He tried to do as he'd been told. His legs, though, still filled with the samurai's unearthly cold, were numb and unresponsive. As he tried to crawl over the ship's rail, he shifted his weight too quickly and fell. Watching in startled fear as the boat rose up to meet his face, he felt his arm wrenched from behind. Pulled upward, he was kept from landing face-first into the boat. His legs continued to go down and smacked into the side of the craft as he dangled there by his arm, but he barely felt the impact. This bothered him more than the fact he could have been hurt.

The samurai pulled him up farther until he got his legs into the boat before suddenly letting go of his wrist. Toshi collapsed to his knees, the thread of cold pouring through his bones replaced by a jolt of warmth from his pumping heart.

The fog that had followed them on the streets slithered



from the fishing boat down into the skiff as if it hungered for them. Toshi sat still in the bottom of the craft, trying to dispel the memory of the wooden deck rushing toward his face.

The samurai lowered himself into the skiff in a fluid drop, barely rocking the boat. Gazing down at Toshi for a moment, he slid his hand onto the shorter of his two swords before whipping it out of its sheath and slicing through the skiff's mooring line in one smooth motion.

"If you try to leave this craft, I will cut you in half before you can hit the water."

Toshi would have laughed at the irony if he hadn't thought the samurai would cut him down for that, too. His body felt so numb and slow he doubted he could even save himself if the boat suddenly tipped over, let alone try to escape.

He felt the samurai's green gaze staring at him again. He tried his best not to let his own cross its path.

"Take the oar and row us out to the middle of the bay." The samurai waved his hand toward the back of the boat.

He crawled to where he'd been ordered and stared at the long angled oar waiting there. Watching to make sure his hands got around it, since he still couldn't feel them, he moved it back and forth to get the craft moving.

As the small boat inched away from the docks to deeper water, he glanced back at the city one more time. His eyes grew moist as he stared at the dark silhouette, no hint showing in the darkness of the bustle and life that had made it so dear to him over the years.

The fog grew in intensity. It cut off his view of the city. In a way, it made it seem as if the city had never existed.

After a time, the skiff picked up speed. Toshi became ever more grateful for the task the demon had given him, as it loosened the numbness from his body. The heat of the work was exhilarating compared to the unearthly coldness that had gripped him before.

He stared at the samurai's armored back, seeing nothing but fog and sea beyond him. When he was feeling more like himself, he worked up the courage to speak.

"Sir, might I ask where we are going?"

The samurai didn't react to his question, just remained fixed, facing the prow of the boat. Toshi continued rowing and didn't speak again. He still had no idea as to their destination when his arms began to tire.

"Stop here." The samurai made a chopping motion with his hand.

Toshi stopped rowing, staring at the samurai in surprise, able to see nothing but the swirling fog around them. Keeping his gaze locked on the samurai, he waited to see what he would ask him to do next. An unwanted chill cut through him as he tried his best not to guess at what it might be.

His attention was drawn to the water as bubbles formed on its surface. The bubbles grew to a writhing mass, a soft glow coming from beneath them. The fog slithered away as if afraid of what was happening in the water. He watched the spot of light beneath the bubbles get larger and brighter.

His knuckles turned white as he gripped his oar in apprehension. The knocking of his pulse in his ears was the only sound he could hear as an eerily glowing rod broke through the surface of the frothing sea.

The rod rose higher. A crossbeam broke the surface beneath it, long strands of seaweed strung from its length. A tattered square sail followed, emblazoned with a gold-colored replica of the crest on the samurai's armor.

As terror welled within him, his gaze was inexorably drawn to the samurai. The warrior slowly turned to face him and stared at him with his burning green eyes. Toshi shook his head in helpless denial as the samurai stood up and pointed toward the still-rising ghost vessel.

"No! This is not my karma," he said. "I won't go to a cursed ship!"

The samurai stared at him impassively, the green light issuing from the demon mask's eyes brighter than before.

"Row.

Toshi shook his head again, forgetting whom he was denying in the grip of his horror. He let go of the oar as if it burned him. His gaze darted around, as he looked for a way to escape and saw his only option was to dive into the sea.

He turned, determined to leave the boat. Something solid struck the back of his knee, folding his leg under him. As he struggled not to fall, the samurai's lacquered scabbard flashed ahead of him just before it slammed into his stomach. He fell hard into the boat.

Panic drove him to ignore the flaring pain in his leg and stomach as he fought to throw himself overboard. He'd reached the side of the boat when his cotton tunic was wrenched from behind and he was yanked with it. He tried desperately to pull away, his fists flying, but a shot of unearthly cold wove down his spine, draining his resistance as fleshless fingers wrapped around the back of his neck.

He screamed.

His terror and desperation multiplied as the cold spread through him. Still screaming, he tried to pry the bony fingers from his neck, but his hands were slapped away. Soon he could no longer move. With a soundless cry of fear, he shut his eyes, not wanting to see what awaited him.

The flat-bottomed ship had come fully to the surface. Indistinct shapes moving within it silently brought out long poles with hooks and snared the small boat. As the skiff was secured to the side of the larger vessel, a number of fleshless hands reached down toward it.

Toshi fought as half a dozen hands attached to his body and pulled him upward. The samurai's hand left the back of his neck. In panic, he snapped his eyes open to see why the demon had deserted him. He gazed straight into a grinning skull.

Empty eye sockets stared into his own, a reddish glow

flaring for a moment in their depths. He opened his mouth to scream, but no sound passed his lips. The fleshless face came closer. The creature's eyes flared with bright-red light. Toshi tried to squirm away, but in vain. His heart threatened to burst from horror before that fleshless grin.

An arm thrust between them. Sudden hope flared within him as his frightened gaze shifted to seek the samurai's masked face. He didn't feel the samurai's hand as it latched onto his. His numbed body was turned around, and he glimpsed the rest of the crew. His mind wouldn't count them, it didn't want to see them. It shrieked in disbelief as he stared at the white gleaming skeletons before him.

They stood upright and wore clothes he would have seen on men on any common street. Some wore short pants and sleeveless shirts. Others only wore fudoshi—a long cloth coiled around the body that served to cover the genitals like a loincloth—and short vests.

Half-supporting, half-dragging him, the samurai took him toward a door set in the wall of the raised deck housing the tiller. His mind as numbed by terror as his body was by cold, he didn't resist as he was taken into the small hallway beyond.

Ignoring the ladder going below, the samurai pulled him forward, stopping before the second doorway on the right. Throwing the door open, he thrust Toshi inside.

Unable in his paralysis to break his fall, he slammed onto the glowing floor. The door was closed and bolted behind him.

The pain of the fall a very faint perception, Toshi gave in to his fear and despair. He scooted to a corner and hugged his knees to his chest. His wide eyes stared at the glow that permeated everything in the room.

Read Chapters 2 and 3 at [www.gloriaoliver.com/samurai](http://www.gloriaoliver.com/samurai)

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