



## The Unbearable Lightness of Dragons: A Novel of the Light Dragons

By Katie Macalister

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For Ysolde, being a dragon is starting to bite.

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### **Bibliography**

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## **Editorial Review**

### **About the Author**

Katie MacAlister lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and dogs, and can often be found lurking around online game sites.

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### **Chapter One**

“Lady.”

Blinking at the sudden sound of a male voice, I turned to see who was speaking, at the same time taking in the noxious smells that wafted around me. I appeared to be in some sort of a dark, rough alleyway that lay between two rows of tall, narrow houses, the overhangs of which blocked out any streams of sunlight that might try to make it down to the ground. Not that there was any sun to be seen now, since it was nighttime, but I was willing to bet that even on the hottest day of the year, the alley would remain dank and unwelcoming.

A crude wooden door next to me bore an almost illegible plaque informing unwary visitors that one Master Bertram would mix pigments for a small fee.

“Painter’s shop,” I murmured to myself, my nose wrinkling at the smell. I was used to the scent of items commonly used to make paint—plants, ore, and such—but the odors that assailed me had their origins with humans and animals. I eyed an open barrel next to me that made my eyes burn. Urine, no doubt, collected for the purposes of making paint. “Just my luck—I haven’t had a vision for a month, and when I get one, it has a great big barrel of pee in it.”

“Dragon.”

The woman’s voice called my attention back from where I was trying to avoid stepping in any of the refuse that clogged the close alley. Skirting the urine barrel, I took a few steps toward the dark figures that stood almost invisible in the deep shadows cast by the buildings, faint light from a couple of sputtering torches the only means of illumination.

The distant sound of voices raised in song reached my ears as in front of me two figures approached each other.

“Why have you summoned me to Rothenburg?” the man demanded to know in an arrogant, somehow familiar voice.

I took a couple of steps closer until I could see the face of the speaker, dimly lit by a torch that leaned drunkenly from a nearby iron sconce.

The woman’s form moved, blocking my view for a moment before she shifted to the side. “You ignored the warnings. You were told what would happen if you continued. Now you must pay.”

I moved to the left, my eyes widening as I watched Constantine Norka, once a black dragon and rival heir to

the wyvern of that sept, laugh first at the woman, then at the two men who emerged from the darkness behind him. “Do you think to frighten me? I am afraid of no dragon alive, and certainly not of you and your friends.”

The woman’s jaw tightened. The two guys behind Constantine closed in, although they kept a respectable distance from him.

“It will be our pleasure to teach you how wrong you’ve been,” she said with a wholly unpleasant smile. “You thought I did not mean what I said? Then you are foolish as well as wrong.”

Constantine laughed again, shaking his head as if in dismay when the woman’s hands started moving in an intricate pattern that I knew cast a harmful spell. “You are here to chastise me, I suppose? I’m not the one who is foolish, then. You have not heard that your precious Baltic is no longer in the sept of the black dragons?”

What the hell? Was Constantine insane, or was I? Sometimes it was hard to know the truth, since my memory of the last five hundred years had been more or less wiped out. But some of that had returned since I’d found Baltic two months past, and I didn’t remember a thing about this little bombshell.

The woman checked, a frown between her brows as she said quickly, “What nonsense is this?”

“It is the truth.” Constantine leaned casually against a battered wooden door. “He was declared ouroboros at the command of the First Dragon for crimes committed against dragonkin. So not even you, who have Baltic in your pocket, can change the fact that I will be named wyvern.”

The woman looked stunned for a few seconds, blinking rapidly as she digested this information. I knew exactly how she felt—if what Constantine said was true, when had it happened? And why on earth hadn’t Baltic or someone told me about it?

“I do not believe you,” she said in a somewhat faltering voice. “Baltic would not . . . What crime did he commit?”

Constantine shrugged. “It is of no matter to me whether you believe me. I do not discuss sept business with those outside the weyr, so if you wish to know more, you will need to ask your pet himself.” A little sneer crept over his face. “I’ve long said Baltic was a weakling; that he hides behind a woman’s skirts proves the fact that he is the basest of cowards, as well. How much did he pay you to threaten me?”

Her hands fisted. “He did not send me, if that is what you mean. I came of my own accord, as a friend to Baltic, because I know well that you have done your best to usurp his rightful position.”

Constantine snorted. “I am the heir to the wyvern of the black dragons, mage, not Baltic. He did his best to undermine that fact with Alexei, but it is I who am victorious, while he is no longer even recognized as a dragon.”

Alexei? That name rang a bell in the dim recesses of my memory. He was the wyvern before Baltic. Which meant that the time this vision was presenting must also be before Baltic was wyvern—but that couldn’t be.

The woman swore under her breath. “This is some trickery of yours, I am bound to believe. You said the dragon ancestor was involved. How did you manage that?”

Her words came out with the velocity of bullets. I stepped back, not wanting to get within range of eye contact with her.

“I am well-known to the First Dragon,” Constantine bragged with an easy smile. The two men behind him, evidently hearing the confidence in his voice, moved back as well. “But you are mistaken in thinking I had anything to do with Baltic’s fall from grace. He managed that himself.”

The woman took a deep breath, her hands still fisted. “I will investigate your claims, dragon. If they prove as false as you are, then your suffering at my hands will treble.”

Something wasn’t right. How could I be having a vision of this time? I shook my head at the thought. I couldn’t. It just wasn’t possible.

“Yet more threats. How I will live in fear,” Constantine answered with obvious amusement.

“This doesn’t make any sense,” I said as I moved forward until I was next to him. “I wasn’t even born until Baltic had been wyvern for almost a hundred years. Constantine, what is happening?”

The woman smiled again, and it was just as unpleasant as the previous time. “I look forward to proving to you that I am not to be taken lightly.”

“Hello? Can anyone hear me?” I waved my hand in front of the woman’s face, but obviously neither she nor Constantine registered my presence, which made sense, seeing as I hadn’t been alive at this time. But why was I seeing this moment in the past? And who on earth was this woman that she felt comfortable speaking in such a threatening manner to a powerful dragon?

“This conversation is putting me to sleep. If you are done with your empty threats, I will leave you to practice your vainglorious speeches.”

A little corona of blue-white light crackled around her at Constantine’s words. I frowned at it, trying to remember where I’d seen something similar, shaking my head when my brain refused to cooperate.

“The day will come when you will regret those words,” she warned.

“I regret only the amount of time I’ve wasted on you. You lured me into your grasp by telling me you could aid me, when all along it was Baltic you championed. I knew that, of course, for despite your opinion, I am no fool. But it amused me nonetheless to watch you cavort in your attempts to promote his cause while hindering mine. Your antics are no longer entertaining, however. Quite simply, Lady Antonia, you bore me.”

The woman reached right through me to slap Constantine. Both of us jumped. I stared at her in stark surprise, examining her face. Lady Antonia. She had to be Antonia von Endres, the famous archimage, and once Baltic’s lover.

I narrowed my eyes at her, wondering if that was why I had been given the vision—to engage my jealousy? *Enrage* was more like it. . . .

“All right, I’m willing to admit that I’m lost,” I told the pair. “The only other visions I’ve had have been memories of my past that the dragon inside me used to try to get me to remember who I am. I’ve never once seen one where I wasn’t there in person. But assuming this is a really pathetic attempt to incite jealousy, I have to tell you guys that it’s failed. I’m not jealous of Baltic’s relationships before he met me. Not in the least. They don’t matter at all. Not even the fact that you would give him your infamous light sword just because he was so incredible between the sheets matters to me.” A little belch of fire erupted around Antonia’s feet. I pretended I didn’t see it.

Without another word, Antonia—not seeing the fire any more than she had seen me—executed a one-eighty

turn and marched off into the darkness, her two bully boys following with only brief smoldering glances at Constantine as they passed him.

I watched until they all disappeared into the shadows, then turned my gaze to Constantine. “You’re not going to take that, are you?”

He ignored me, just as I assumed he would, instead rubbing his face as he muttered something rude under his breath before turning to walk away in the opposite direction.

“I guess you are going to take that. Well.” I looked around the unkempt area, stared for a minute at the nearest shuttered windows of the tall, narrow houses, and made a frustrated gesture. A dog barked in the distance. A rat sat on the edge of the urine barrel and considered me. A duck wandered past, quacking softly to itself. “Now what the hell am I supposed to do?” I asked no one in particular.

My voice echoed against the building, growing louder and louder until it seemed to fill my head with pounding, nonstop noise.

“Stop!” I yelled, my hands over my ears as I doubled up in pain.

“OK, but I thought you’d like them.”

My eyes shot open at the matter-of-fact voice. I looked into the eyes of a nine-year-old boy, one who held a portable music device in one hand, a black cord trailing from it to my head. “Brom?”

“You don’t like Rampaging Wildebeests?” He looked at the music player, then at me, his serious brown eyes considering me with a perception that belied his nine years. “OK, but you were dancing around like crazy to ‘Take Me by the Horns’ the other day. I thought you’d like their new CD.”

With a shaky hand I pulled off the headphones my son had put on me while I was off in vision-land. “They’re very nice. Loud, but nice. Are you done settling in? And . . . er . . . how long have you been standing there?”

Brom sat down beside me on the warm stone bench that clung to the side of the house. “Yeah, I’ve unpacked, although I hope this is the last time we move. And a couple of minutes. You had a funny look on your face. Were you thinking about something a long time ago?”

I hadn’t told Brom much about the visions I’d had a couple of months before. They ceased after that fateful day when we had been ostracized from the weyr by the rest of the dragons, and I assumed the part of me that had once been a dragon in centuries past had given up trying to get me to acknowledge it. “Something like that. I told your stepfather that three houses in two months was enough, so hopefully he’ll stop insisting we move every few weeks.”

“Jim says Baltic isn’t my stepfather, not unless you marry him, and you’re still married to Gareth, except maybe he’s married to Ruth. Jim says that’s illegal, and that Baltic is going to string him up by his balls if he ever finds him again. Jim says you might do the same.”

I eyed my child. “Trust that demon to become your go-to source of information. Honey, when I said you could talk to Jim despite the fact that we are at war with the other dragons, I didn’t expect you to discuss our personal issues.”

Brom squinted at me. “Is it true?”

“That Baltic is going to string up your father by his testicles? No, of course not.”

“No, is it true that Baltic isn’t my stepdad until you guys get married?”

I slumped back against the rough stone of the old farmhouse that Baltic had taken as our latest refuge against possible attacks by other dragons. Explaining the intricacies of my relationship with Baltic hadn’t been high on the list of things I wanted to do. “No, it’s not true. You know that I was born many hundreds of years ago, right?”

“Yeah. You’re a dragon.”

“I was born a dragon. I’m not one now. Now I’m just a wyvern’s mate with a dragon inside. . . . well, that’s kind of complicated. Let’s stick to the easy stuff. I was born several hundred years ago, and met Baltic, who was the wyvern of his sept.”

“The black dragons. The one that Kostya runs now,” Brom said, nodding.

“Exactly.” I wondered briefly how Baltic had ended up back in the sept, and with enough standing to take control when the previous wyvern left, but figured that was something speculation wasn’t going to answer.

“And Kostya used to be his homey, but now they beat each other up. And Kostya keeps breaking Baltic’s nose.”

“Just twice,” I said, irritation rising at the memory of events a week past, when we had run into the black wyvern in London. “And only because Baltic was behaving properly and Kostya was being a rat fink. But that’s neither here nor there. When I met Baltic all those hundreds of years ago, I became his . . . er . . . wife. Then some things happened, and Kostya killed Baltic, and I lost my memory, and then about fifteen years ago, I married your father. Or I thought I did—I didn’t realize that Baltic had been resurrected, which meant I wasn’t really married to Gareth. So because I married Baltic first, I don’t need to marry him again in order for him to be your stepdad.”

Brom looked somewhat skeptical, but he didn’t dispute my somewhat convoluted explanation of the complex relationship I had with Baltic. “Jim was wrong, then?”

“Yes. Even demons as old as Jim can be wrong. You don’t have anything to worry about—Baltic is your father in all ways but actually having a blood relationship. You know he loves you, don’t you?”

“Well . . . he claimed me as his son. That’s the same thing, isn’t it?”

I sighed and gave Brom a swift hug and kiss on the top of his head. “For Baltic, that’s the very same thing. Remember what I told you about some men?”

“They have problems expressing their emotions, and you have to read between the lines,” Brom parroted from a previous discussion.

“Exactly. Baltic isn’t the sort of person who marches about telling everyone he loves them. Kind of like someone else I know,” I said with a little nudge of my elbow into his side. Brom had lately developed a horror of demonstrating affection whenever anyone else was around, feeling it was beneath his dignity. “His actions speak louder than his words, remember. And if he didn’t love you, he wouldn’t have gone out of his way to find houses that had space for you to set up your horrible mummy lab, now would he?”

He rolled his eyes. “Maybe. He does hug me.”

“There you go. You know, sometimes people need to know that you love them, too, and Baltic hasn’t really had anyone to love him for a very long time, so he needs all the affection we can show him.”

“Is that why he’s always making you kiss him?”

“He’s not exactly making me kiss him,” I said with a little laugh. “I like doing it. But yes, because he spent so much time alone, he gets a little bit insecure, so I go out of my way to let him know I love him.”

“By kissing him.” The look on his face was priceless.

“Yes, but you don’t have to kiss him if you don’t want to. A hug does just as well.”

A little frown pulled his brows together. “Gareth says guys who do that are gay.”

“Gareth is a twerp, and you shouldn’t listen to him.” I looked up, noting the love of my two lives heading toward us, a familiar scowl on his handsome face. “Just remember that both Baltic and I love you, and nothing else is as important as that. Are you packed for your visit?”

“Naw.” He pursed his lips and watched as Baltic marched toward us. “Maybe I’ll go do that now.”

“If you want to visit May and Gabriel, yes, you should. Hello, handsome.” The last sentence was addressed to the dark-eyed, dark-haired man who stopped in front of me, his hands on his hips as he frowned down the long length of his torso to where I sat.

“Mate.” He shifted his glare to Brom. “Are you still intent on spurning your fine home and returning to the silver wyvern’s house?”

I bit back a little snort of laughter. When the dragons had exiled us from the weyr and declared war, I had worried for Brom’s safety, but was assured by all that while the dragons took their wars very seriously, they did not extend warlike acts to children. That Gabriel allowed May to invite Brom for a weekend stay at their house in London—so he could visit the mummies at the British Museum—was, I felt sure, a sign that the determination of the weyr to remain at war with Baltic and me was waning.

Baltic interpreted it differently, feeling it was Gabriel’s intention to undermine his relationship with Brom. It took three weeks of negotiation between Gabriel and Baltic before he agreed to the event, and then only after making some fairly obnoxious statements to Gabriel about what he would do should Gabriel not take care of Brom in a manner that Baltic felt reasonable.

Brom looked thoughtful for a moment, slid me a quick glance, then leaned forward and hugged Baltic. The latter looked so surprised that I did laugh, although I covered it up with a little cough.

“I’ll be back Sunday night,” Brom told Baltic, releasing him. “I promise I won’t like Gabriel more than you.”

Baltic blinked at him for a moment or two, then clapped his hand on Brom’s shoulder and said, “You are my son. Of course you will not honor anyone more than your mother or me. It will be good for Gabriel to see that, however, so you are right to wish to demonstrate such. Pavel will be ready to drive us there shortly. Do you need money?”

Brom wasn’t at all a mercenary sort of child, but he did have eclectic—and very expensive—tastes, and despite the fact that he received a generous allowance, his eyes lit up with hope.

“I’ve already given him money to see the museum and buy a few mementos.” I shooed Brom toward the

house. "He doesn't need any more."

"Aw, Sullivan!"

"Your mother has spoken," Baltic told him, then pulled out a money clip.

"Baltic!" I protested when Brom quite happily took the bills he offered. I took the money from Brom and gave it back to Baltic. "He'll just spend that on things he doesn't need."

Baltic handed it back to Brom. "He is a boy. Boys need spending money."

Brom nodded rapidly.

"And you're trying to raise funds to restore Dauva," I pointed out, retrieving the money and stuffing it into Baltic's pocket. "That's not going to happen if you don't stop slipping him money every time he leaves the house."

Brom's face fell.

"No pouting, buster," I told him. "Go get your things packed."

"My son does not pout," Baltic said with a stern look bent on Brom, interrupting him as he was about to protest. "Ysolde does not wish for me to give you cash. I will not go against her desires. We will both do as she bids."

"Thank you. I know you just want Brom to be happy, but I appreciate your upholding my authority despite that."

"You are my mate and his mother. I could not do anything else," Baltic answered, watching as Brom, with dragging steps, slowly made his way to the house before yelling after him, "Tell Pavel to give you one of my credit cards."

Brom cheered and raced off.

I put my hands on my hips and glared.

"You did not wish for me to give him cash. A credit card is not cash," he pointed out, blithely ignoring the obvious.

"You are incorrigible. You're just lucky that you're so incredibly handsome, I'm willing to overlook that fact now and again."

"I know what it's like to not have money," Baltic said with a half shrug.

That stopped me in my tracks. "You do? I thought all dragons were rich as sin. When were you poor?"

"When I was resurrected. There were only a handful of black dragons, most of whom were in hiding, so none of them could help me. Then I located Pavel, but he had taken to robbery to exist." Baltic made a face. "He wasn't very good at it. He was in a mortal prison when I found him."

I wrapped my arms around his waist and kissed the corner of his mouth. "I had no idea. So you and he got together and started raising money?"

“Yes. Our first concern was our safety, then Dauva. Now that has changed.”

“Changed how? You still want Dauva back.”

“Yes, but now my first concern is you and Brom. Dauva will wait until I know you are safe and content.”

I looked up at him, this man who for centuries was reviled by other dragons as a murderous madman, my heart full to overflowing with admiration and love. “Without a doubt, that is the loveliest thing anyone has ever said to me. Kiss me.”

“Gladly, but I will point out first that you said the very same thing last week when I told you that the sight of you makes my stones tighten.”

“Putting aside your own desires so that Brom and I will be happy definitely trumps your testicles,” I answered, licking his lower lip. “Fire?”

“You have your own fire,” he murmured, interest lighting the dark depths of his black eyes as I wiggled against him, reveling in the way my body fit against all of his hard planes. “You should give me your fire, mate.”

“All right, but it’s your turn next time.” I bit his lip gently, my fingers working free the leather thong that held back his shoulder-length brown hair, concentrating as I did so on rousing the dragon that lived deep within my psyche. I had yet to master the skill that came so naturally to all dragons—harnessing their fire—but Baltic insisted that I practice it every day in hopes that one day I would return to being the dragon I once was.

I focused on the moment, allowing the scent of him to sink into me. The feel of his body moving restlessly against mine did much to stir the embers, but it wasn’t until he took charge of the kiss, possessing my mouth in a way that left my toenails steaming, that I felt able to pull on my dragon fire.

Baltic gently bit my neck, knowing how much I loved that, and, sure enough, the dragon fire rose within me until it erupted from me in a belch of flame, splatting against Baltic’s chest, then dissipating immediately.

I eyed his chest with a critical gaze. He stopped nuzzling my neck and sighed. “You have not been practicing as you ought.”

“I haven’t had time, what with moving every couple of weeks. Speaking of which, I hope you don’t find anything wrong with the security of this house, because I don’t plan on moving again for a long time.”

“You are changing the subject,” he said, his sleek ebony eyebrows pulling together. “You swore to me that you would practice taming your fire. You have not done so.”

“I’ve been busy, as I just said.” I pinched his arm, just to let him know I didn’t appreciate either the frown or the arrogant, bossy tone of his voice. “Besides, we have your fire. That’s enough for me.”

“The fact remains that you promised me you would do something, but have not.”

I glanced up at him, suddenly curious about an unfamiliar note in his voice. “Why are you making such a big deal about this?”

His face was hard and closed, but there was a devilish light of enjoyment in his eyes that he couldn’t disguise, much though he tried. “You must be punished, mate.”

“Punished! Are you out of your ever-livin’ . . . wa-a-a-ait a minute. What sort of punished? Punished as in you’re going to go all Drake on me and tell me what to do all the time, which will only serve to piss me off, or punished as in something naughty we used to do three hundred years ago, but which I’ve forgotten?”

One corner of his mouth twitched, his eyes downright wicked now. “Perhaps a little of both.”

I squirmed against him, the unspoken intent in his eyes making me shiver with anticipation. “Well . . . Brom is going to be gone for three days. I suppose I could put up with a little dominance in order to explore our past relationship. Who knows? It might help me find the dragon inside me. Hmm?”

“There’s going to be a dragon inside you—that I promise,” he answered, flames licking up my body as he leaned forward, about to kiss me again.

A voice interrupted us. “Phone for you, Ysolde.”

I sighed into Baltic’s mouth and turned to accept the phone that Pavel, Baltic’s guard and oldest friend, held out to me. His face was unreadable, but amusement danced in his dark eyes. “I wouldn’t have interrupted you, but it is the silver shaman. She says it is important.”

“Kaawa?” I asked, taking the phone. “I wonder what she wants. Hello, Kaawa? How are you? Is everything all right?”

“Mate!” Baltic demanded.

“One moment please. Baltic has to vent his spleen, and I’ve found if I don’t let him do it, he gets more unreasonable than usual,” I told her before she could answer my questions.

“I am not unreasonable. I am never unreasonable, as can be seen by the fact that I am allowing my son to leave my protection. Must I remind you that you agreed, when you begged me to permit Brom’s visit, that you would have no other interaction with the silver sept?” Baltic asked, frowning fiercely.

“Yes, but this is just Kaawa. She’s not really a dragon.”

“She is the mother to the silver wyvern. What I do not understand is why you would be happy to have Brom visit Gabriel, when it was he, along with the other wyverns, who accused me of killing blue dragons and named you ouroboros.”

A little pang spiked into my heart. Even though I didn’t remember anything about my past as a dragon other than what the visions had shown me, the moment when both Gabriel and Kostya formally severed my ties with their respective septs was painfully strong in my memory.

“I’m going to talk to her, Baltic. She’s a nice woman, she’s learned in dragon lore, and she wants to help me resolve the issue with my inner dragon. And before you say it, I know you’re learned in dragon lore, too, but you haven’t been able to help me deal with this whole ‘I used to be a dragon’ thing, and Kaawa has. Kind of. Oh, and speaking of that, I have something I want to ask you about the past, but that can wait until I’m done with this call.”

He looked for a minute like he was going to argue the point, but a quick glance at my forehead had him muttering under his breath instead as he turned and stomped off, Pavel following in his wake.

“I’m so sorry about that, Kaawa. You know how Baltic is.”

She chuckled in my ear, her voice, thick with an Australian accent, warming me even though we were continents apart. “Not really, but from what Gabriel has told me, you have your hands full. How are you, child?”

“We’re fine. Brom is about to visit Gabriel and May for the weekend, as a matter of fact. It’s very kind of them to invite him for a stay, considering the war and all.”

“Pfft. That is more of a formality than anything, don’t you think?”

“Well, that’s what Aisling and May say, but Baltic takes it very seriously. He’s busy with plans to free his friend Thala from wherever it is Drake has her stashed. I probably shouldn’t have told you that, but I figured not only would you not carry tales to Gabriel, but the wyverns probably already know that Baltic wants Thala back.”

She was silent for a moment. “I would not carry tales, no, but I will tell Gabriel anything that I feel endangers him or his wintiki.”

“I would expect that. I can assure you that despite the animosities all around, I wouldn’t condone a plan to harm any dragon, let alone people I like.”

The smile came back into her voice. “You did not tell me how you were feeling.”

I thought about the strange vision. “I’m fine as well.”

“One of my dreamings spoke of you. You have a great confusion inside you, child, and it is growing if it can reach to my dreaming.”

“It’s growing?” A little shiver skittered down my back. “I don’t know what to say to that other than it makes me feel more than a little freaked out. What confusion? The dragon, you mean?”

“That is part of it, yes.” Her voice, normally so warm and soothing, went a little rough. “I do not know. . . . I am not sure, but I believe that something has changed. What would that be?”

If anyone else had been so nosy, I would have had a thing or two to say to them, but Kaawa had tried for the last few months to help me discover why the dragon I used to be was buried so deep inside me that it manifested itself only with visions of my past.

“As a matter of fact, something did happen a short while ago. I had another vision.”

“That is significant, but not such that it should affect my dreaming,” she said slowly.

“This wasn’t a vision of things that happened in the past, Kaawa. Or rather, it probably was, but it didn’t concern me. It happened before I was even born.”

“Tell me,” she urged, and I sat back down on the stone bench made warm by the sun and leaned against the side of the house, the drone of bees as they bustled about a nearby hydrangea bush providing a lazy, sonorous background as I described what I had witnessed.

“I don’t know why my inner dragon would want me to see that—what does it care about Constantine before he had anything to do with me?—but I assume the significance must have something to do with the First Dragon having Baltic kicked out of the sept. Or do you think it was Antonia? She used to be his girlfriend, you know. Or maybe it was Constantine himself? It’s so confusing! It’s enough to drive me insane.”

“You’re not insane,” she said slowly, obviously thinking it over. “But I do not think it was the dragon within you who gave you that vision, child. The events that happened were beyond its scope.”

“No? What did, then?”

“You are marked by the First Dragon. He is the only one who could have the ability to allow you to see things beyond your knowledge, and I can well believe that such an act would disturb my dreaming.”

I rubbed the spot on my forehead where the First Dragon, the father of all dragonkin who ever were, or ever would be, had touched me. It had left a mark that was identical to the sept emblem that Baltic and I bore, that of an etched sun, but over the last few months, the mark on my forehead had faded until it disappeared entirely. “I’m sorry to be so ignorant about this, but I thought your dreaming was a representation of your faith, tied in to the land and animals. How could the First Dragon have an impact on that?”

“I have two dreamings—the wintiki, or night bird, and light. It is the latter that was disturbed. I have long suspected that the First Dragon’s songline was located in Australia, although I have yet to prove it.”

“A songline is . . . ?”

She laughed. “I did not call to give you a lecture in Aboriginal history, Ysolde. It would take much time to explain it all, but for now I will simply say that a songline is the dreaming and trail created by spirit beings such as the First Dragon.”

“All right. So because he left behind some sort of an ancient trail, that’s affected your dreaming?”

“Yes. Only his touch upon you would result in such a thing. Tell me again what vision he gave you.”

I described once more the scene between Constantine and the female mage.

“I have heard nothing about the event Constantine described,” she said thoughtfully. “There is no record of Baltic being expelled from his sept. And it is unheard of for the First Dragon to interfere with the weyr. I wonder if Constantine . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“Could he be lying?” I asked, and thought about that for a minute. “I don’t know. I don’t think so. I’m just going to have to ask Baltic about it.”

She laughed. “It is always a challenge to get information from a dragon, and doubly so when it concerns something they do not wish to discuss.”

“And well I know it. But this is too big for him to hide—at least I think it is. I certainly feel like being declared ouroboros is a life-altering event. If it’s true, what could he have done to piss off the First Dragon to that extent?”

“That I do not know, and I suspect you will find it difficult to get Baltic to tell you. But I admit I would give much to know the answer.”

“Let’s look at the facts: the First Dragon resurrects me when Constantine kills me.”

“Yes,” Kaawa said.

“Then he tells me, five hundred years later, mind you, which is a bit annoying, that I am supposed to do something for him.”

“And you somehow let him down before—didn’t he say that?” Laughter was in her voice, taking the sting from the comment.

“Yes.” I sighed. “There’s just nothing like knowing you’ve let down the one dragon ancestor who you’ve failed in the past, and he’s told you to do something for him without telling you what it is, and oh, yes, don’t blow it. Again. You know, it’s a wonder I’m still sane having that hanging over me.”

“I don’t think it’s a bad thing, Ysolde,” Kaawa said slowly, her voice now meditative. “You have warranted his trust for some task. That is an honor, no matter how you look at it.”

“With the bottom line that if the First Dragon sent the vision about Constantine to me, then it must be related to whatever it is I’m supposed to do.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. It is definitely odd.”

“I agree, but what am I supposed to do about it other than try to worm the information out of Baltic?”

“I am afraid I do not know, but I suspect you will find that answer for yourself.”

“I wish I knew how I was supposed to do that,” I said, weary of constantly being in the dark concerning whatever task the First Dragon expected me to perform.

“If I could answer that, I would be able to tell you what it is the First Dragon desires of you,” she said with a little laugh. “Talk to your mate. Encourage him to tell you about his past. The answer may well lie there.”

“It might,” I said, a sudden insight coming to me. “But you know, Kaawa, if it was something Baltic did that is connected with my task, then it seems to me that the First Dragon would have given me a vision of that event, not of a discussion by two unrelated people casually mentioning it. No, I think this is a very big—if obscure—hint about something the First Dragon wants me to do about Constantine. He was the focus of the vision. But what is it I’m supposed to do? He’s dead, after all. He is dead, isn’t he?”

“I believe so, yes. I have not heard otherwise.”

“No, but you didn’t know Baltic was alive for almost forty years, either.”

“Gabriel knew something was amiss in the weyr. He could feel a disturbance,” she pointed out.

“True.” I vaguely remembered May telling me something about that, although Gabriel had been hard put to believe that it really was Baltic who had returned to the land of the living.

“It could be something to do with the female,” Kaawa pointed out before continuing, “I must hang up now, child, but I am relieved to know that it was the First Dragon who touched you, and thus my dreaming, and not a malevolent force. Be well.”

I thanked her for troubling herself, still trying to figure out something about the vision that would clue me in to what the First Dragon wanted me to do. “It may be an obscure hint, but it’s surely better than no hint at all,” I said to myself before glancing at my watch and exclaiming at the time. I headed for Brom’s room at a fast trot, since Baltic hated to be late for appointments. “Another vision or two, and I bet it’ll all be clear to me.”

My words echoed hollowly off the empty hall as I took the stairs two at a time, leaving me with a sense of ill-fated foreboding.

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