

“Ow ~ Bazall, stop that,” Caiden bellowed as he rapped the dragon on the nose. The young dragon cocked his silver head to one side and wrinkling the ridges along his brow in what passed as a frown, reluctantly opened his jaws and allowed the dragonkeeper to remove his arm from his mouth.

Bazall defiantly snorted as his long tailed flicked back and forth behind him, keeping his faceted eyes focused on the man in front of him. Dragon training required finesse, and Caiden was as good as his father had been. It was all he ever wanted. He had been trying to teach this three year old how to kneel for mounting and it hadn't gone well.

Caiden's oldest son had been watching the training, but wasn't overly concerned. Working with dragons always presented opportunity for harm. “Didya get a bite, da?” Cael asked.

“Aye, I did. I think for him it is more of a game. Just letting me know he's bigger and stronger. He doesn't realize how sharp those teeth are. If he hadda meant to hurt me, he woulda.”

“Yar bleedin just the same.” Cael stated.

“I've had worse.” Caiden said, then settled his left hand on the young dragon's neck, and speaking softly in dragonspeak, began to soothe the young beast. He simultaneously stroked the ridge between the lidded eyes with his right hand, the blood from the bite near his shoulder running down and dripping onto the dirt. Only when Bazall had calmed down did Caiden motion with his right arm in a gesture of release, and the young dragon lifted up from the pasture. He circled overhead, then hearing the bellow of the older dragons, gave two powerful strokes and launched himself toward the tree line and the herd down by the river.

“Always end on a positive command son. That's what they will be remembering. Why, that one is as stubborn as they come. This crop of young ones is as cantankerous as any I have ever seen.” They both watched the young dragon ascend in dizzying circles then disappear beyond the trees.

Caiden and his kind were forest dwellers. They were simple folk who knew the ways of the land and had a way with all of the beasts but lacked other kinds of learning. Stout and muscular, with wild hair that defied taming and a ruddy complexion, Caiden's face had flushed a deep crimson with the pain from the bite. “By the boar that one will be the death of me. That's me for today, son. I best get this attended to.”

Dressed simply in tanned pelts, pants made of a coarse woolen fabric and doeskin boots, Caiden and his kind had been taming and training dragons for eons. The ability to

speaking to the dragons came as natural to them as their own language.

“Go up to the house now, lad, and let your mother know that I am going up to Llynna’s. Check on your brother and sister for me, aye. They are working with the four year olds down in the lower field.”

“Yes, da,” Cael answered.

Heading across the field, Caiden took the trail that ran along the bluff, looking down upon the dragons in the river below. It was only a ten minute walk to his neighbor’s house.

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Llynna was murmuring softly to herself as she worked with the fresh stems of lavender. Expertly tying them with thick string, she then added each bundle to the others hanging upside down from the old beam over her workbench. The pleasant scent of fresh lavender permeated the entire cottage. Something was up. She could feel it in her bones. The tingling across the back of her neck and up and down her spine told her so. Not the kind of premonition that brought a knot in her stomach with a warning attached, or a foreboding that made her feel she had to summon the wizard for protection. It was just the kind of feeling that meant that something unusual was on its way.

“Chooka, I wonder what adventure is coming? My whole body is tingling. The summer has been very quiet. A little diversion would be most welcome.”

Chooka was in her bed at the end of the workbench happily taking a nap as Llynna worked. One eye lazily opened in a half-hearted response to what her mistress was saying. “Woof” was all she could manage before drifting back to sleep in the warmth of the late afternoon sun.

“The lavender is so wonderful this year. So fragrant.” Llynna ran her hands lovingly over her workbench as she wrapped up the last of the long stems. The workbench ran the length of the room, framed with sturdy shelves built into the wall. They were filled with a multitude of glass jars, pottery jugs, baskets and tins filled with herbs, dried flowers, roots, and other assorted medicinals. The cottage and workroom had been made by the elves ages ago. When she became the new Apothecary, Llynna had been told that her workbench came from the same sacred white ash tree that also made the thrones at Castle Caernag. Reaching up to the middle shelf, she grabbed a jar marked Calendula. Gathering several other ingredients, she began to create a sticky mess in a small wooden bowl

“Ygayla has sent word that the cook’s skin is irritated and she needs a salve. This should do nicely. We will send some to the castle for her.”

Surveying the various jars of herbs, she remarked, “We are getting really low on our inventory. It is a good thing that the Fall Calendula is blooming. What I have from last spring is practically gone.” Examining the different jars, Llynna began dusting off those that hadn’t been used in a while. “We’re getting a little low on Heartsease and we won’t be able to pick more until spring. I suppose I will need to do a complete inventory. We have plenty of Meadowsweet and Mugwort, but the Betony and Monkshood is getting low. We can’t be running out of things just because I haven’t been paying attention.”

Suddenly the dog sat up, her ears straining to hear something. Llynna was sweeping all of the loose lavender seeds into the palm of her hands when the dog suddenly let out a loud bark, startling her mistress. As the seeds went flying, the dog jumped up and flew out the open door. Llynna called after her, but Chooka was going so fast there was just a disappearing blur of black and white and the fading sound of her barking. She smiled as she heard the familiar whistle of her neighbor. He appeared in the doorway with the dog jumping up and down beside him. “Oh no, Caiden. Not again,” Llynna lamented.

Caiden smiled as he held up his bleeding arm and a growing red stain near his right shoulder. “Och, he didnee mean to hurt me.”

“You always say that,” she said with a chuckle and a shake of her head. Llynna escorted her neighbor into the workroom as her dog jumped up and down, looking for attention. Caiden reached down with his left hand and gave the dog an affectionate squeeze.

“Have a seat at the table in the kitchen. I’ll get my things.” As soon as he sat down, the dog settled at his feet. “Who was it this time?” Llynna asked.

“Bazall. He keeps testing me.”

“Seems like they all do. This does seem to be a particularly rambunctious group, though, I must say. I’m surprised you were able to work with Bazall alone. I seem to remember Bazall and Flash were inseparable as yearlings.” Llynna picked up a tray and began filling it with a needle, thread, scissors, strips of cloth and several jars of medicinals. She sat down across from Caiden and went to work cleansing his wounds.

“Aye, you are right there. They have both matured into feisty three year olds. When they first came to us, he and Flash had something the other yearlings didn’t. It is that something that has made both of them stand out. I’m sure they will both be lead dragons when they mature. It makes for a much tougher time for me, but them that are born to be leaders of the pack always stand out. Razlek has already spoken for Flash. Broudan has claimed Bazall when he matures. They are both just waiting for them to be full-grown.”

“How bad is it?” Caiden asked.

It’s not too bad. I just need to stitch up a few of these larger tears.” Caiden nodded and watched her work. Llynna gently secured the bandages with a knot as she finished.

“There’s that, then. How is the training going? Seems like you have quite a few to deal with at the moment.”

“Almost twenty, if I count the yearlings. They are the easiest because they can’t fly yet. Gwennie is turning out to be quite the dragonrider. She has moved up to working with the four year olds. Cael likes to tease her a bit, but I think she will pass him in skills before the year is out. A natural, she is.”

“I remember watching her ride one of the three year olds this summer. She was so fluid with the dragon it looked like they were one and the same.”

“Aye, she has definitely tapped into her heritage. Cael is another matter. He likes to order everybody about and spends more time getting out of doing things than it would take to get them done. He hasn’t changed since he was a young lad so I don’t hold out much hope for things to be different. Cael has never shown the interest Gwennie has. I wish he would ride more.”

“Ah, well. I know he is the oldest, but perhaps he has another path to take. Before you go, let me get some of the scones I made earlier.”

“Ravalka will be pleased and I can’t say as I would turn one down. I’ll send up some goat’s milk and eggs when I get back.”

“That would be wonderful.” Llynnya said. “I hope you are not working with any more young dragons today.” Before Caiden could respond, a terrified shriek came from up the path.

They looked at each other and started running towards the sound as Chooka bolted out the door at a dead run. The dog disappeared out of site but they could hear her barking all the way. Rushing past the trees lining the foot path that led to the upper field, the screams were getting louder as they came out onto the plateau that overlooked the river. Llynnya and Caiden could see there was a young girl surrounded by three of the yearling dragons near a copse of trees, her screams at a higher pitch and escalating. Three of the yearlings had her surrounded and were sniffing her. She was on the verge of hysteria as Caiden and Llynnya swept in. Caiden issued an order to the dragons and they backed away from the girl. Llynnya put her arm around the girl and led her away with the dog barking at the dragons. Steering the young girl to a fallen tree, Llynnya got her to sit down. “They don’t want to hurt you, my sweet. They are just curious.”

Breathing heavily, a wrenching sob managed to squeak out. Llynnya sat down next to her and put her arm around the girl’s shoulders in a comforting manner. She was shaking so hard, she was having trouble getting her breath. Having Llynnya’s arm around her seemed to calm her down. Chooka had stopped fussing at the dragons and had come to sit next to the girl, nudging her for a pet.

“Oh, my sweet. Have you never seen a dragon before? That must have been quite a shock for you. I’m so sorry that you were so frightened?”

The young girl shook her head no. She was still watching Caiden with the dragons. “Me mum told me lots of stories about dragons, but I never saw one before.”

“Do you remember how you got here?” Llynnya asked gently.

“I was at school playing outside at recess. Lisa was teasing me and calling me names. I ran away and hid behind this big tree. When I touched the tree, I heard a loud pop and felt like I was falling.” She began a series of loud coughs, filled with congestion. Dissolving into tears again, she said, “I want me mum.”

“I’m sure this feels very strange.” Llynnya was patting the girl and trying to comfort her. “What is your name, dear?”

“Avalon.”

“Avalon? What a lovely name. Where are you from?” Llynnya asked.

“Ireland. We live in Los Angeles now.” Dissolving into tears again, the girl began shaking and coughing. “I want to go home.”

Fishing a handkerchief out of her pocket, Llynnya handed it to Avalon, who put it to good use. “Now, now, Avalon. It is going to be ok. Sorry for the fright. You are being very brave. How old are you?”

“I’m twelve,” she said.

Caiden had managed to get two of the yearlings to go back down the path to Dragon’s Bottom. The third, a young female, was mesmerized by the young girl and wouldn’t go anywhere. Caiden had his hand on the back of the dragon, but it was almost as tall as he was. “Llynnya, I’m having some trouble getting Tukka to leave. I think she has a kinship with this girl.”

“You think she has bonded with her?”

“Or wants to.”

“Oh, dear. What is going on?” Llynnya asked. Caiden shrugged.

Now that there was some distance between the girl and the dragon, she was calming down. “Where am I?” Avalon asked, keeping her eyes on the man and the dragon.

“Why, my dear, you are in the land of Faery. You have come through a portal.”

“Are you a fairy? Where are your wings if you are a fairy?”

“Well, I am a human, just like you. Besides, not all fairies have wings.”

Chooka had buried her head in Avalon’s lap. Avalon started petting her and running her hands through the soft coat and scratching the top of her head. It seemed to help the girl and the dog was delighted by the attention. Slowly Avalon calmed down and stopped crying.

Trying to calm the girl further, Llynnya said, “I guess she is pretty excited to have some company. Her name is Chooka.”

Avalon smiled. “I like her name. We had a dog like this in Ireland. She worked the sheep.”

“I bet you miss her. Who is taking care of her? Llynnya asked.

“Me auntie. We couldn’t bring her to Los Angeles. You look like me gran a bit.”

“Do I?” Llynnya asked, surprised. The girl nodded. “Does your gran live in Los Angeles too?”

“Me gran died before we moved. I have a lot of pictures of her, though.”

“I’m so sorry, dear.”

Caiden had kept a respectful distance from the girl and continued to handle the dragon. Tukka had her eyes on Avalon and wouldn’t look anywhere else. “Is that dragon staring at me?” asked the young girl.

“Yes. She seems quite taken with you.” Llynnya said.

“Will she hurt me?”

“No, dear. At this age, she could hurt you accidentally with a playful bite, but they are more curious than anything else.”

Then the girl surprised her. “Can I touch her?”

“Of course. Caiden, Avalon would like to see what Tukka feels like.”

Caiden gave a command to the young dragon, and walked to the log with the dragon by his side. As they neared the young girl, the dragonmaster gave a command and the dragon knelt in front of the young girl, bowing its head. When Tukka brought her head up, she stuck her snout out and came face to face with the girl. As soon as their eyes made contact, both of their eyes dilated then contracted as the bond was forged. Avalon

was mesmerized and tentatively reached out and stroked the creature's ridge above her eyes. Tukka closed her eyes, obviously enjoying this.

"I just had chills run up and down my back. I feel a bit dizzy." Avalon said.

"Well, Avalon, it seems you were to come into Faery so you could meet Tukka. Magic is afoot today. That much I know. This morning, Caiden, I felt as if something was coming in on the wind. I was tingling and could feel it up and down my back. This was what I was feeling. It has been many a year since those from my old realm have come in. I still don't understand how this young girl came straight in and wasn't escorted."

"It isn't unheard of, but it is rare." He said. "It has been quite a day. I guess the dragon lords decided I needed to be here as Avalon came through. I haven't had a bite from a dragon in years. Fate had a hand in this. Of that I'm sure."

Llynya didn't rush the girl, but as soon as she seemed settled enough, they started back toward the house. As they walked back along the path, with Caiden and Tukka walking just behind them, Llynya pointed out some of the herbs in their raised beds and explained their uses. Avalon picked a few loose stems of Lavender, then rubbed them between her hands, releasing the aroma, burying her nose in the heady scent. Llynya was pleasantly surprised that Avalon knew many of the names already of what she was growing. They stopped to admire the wild geraniums spilling over the rock wall. Behind the stone wall supporting them was a footpath that led down through the forest and to the river.

"Where does that go?" asked Avalon.

"Down to the river." Replied Llynya.

"What is down there?" Avalon asked.

"Dragon's Bottom. You see, Avalon, this is a very special place and we are lucky to work with the young dragons until they are ready to be trained for fighting by the dragonriders. Caiden and his kin have been doing this since beyond memory. There are over twenty families in our community who work with the young dragons. I work with the yearlings when I'm not busy with remedies."

"Llynya, we best be getting on," Caiden said. "We should probably get her down to the cottage and settle her in and get Tukka back to the herd. He hesitated at the top of the trail to Dragon's Bottom. Avalon turned around, and surprisingly gave the young dragon a hug. "You can see her again tomorrow if you like," Caiden added.

Avalon nodded. With hesitation, she asked "Can she stay with us a little bit longer?"

Glancing at Llynya, he nodded. "As you wish."

When they arrived at the cottage, Llynna seated Avalon at the small table in the kitchen where Caiden had been. It was tucked into an alcove that was positioned to get afternoon sun. The windows were open, so Caiden kept Tukka on the outside in the courtyard but at the window. Their visitor seemed to have collected herself and was busy petting the dog and rubbing Tukka while Llynna bustled around the kitchen.

“Caiden, can you manage enough time for tea?”

“Oh, aye. I’m a bit peckish and it will tide me over ‘til supper.”

Llynna began setting a tray with thick cream and strawberry jam, plates and cups and had the kettle going for a pot of tea.

“How long have you lived here?” Avalon asked.

“Well, I used to live on a beautiful island in Scotland. One day Chooka and I were out for a walk. I sat on a stump, and ended up here. Just like you. We went back and forth several times, then decided to stay.”

“I can go home?” Avalon asked happily. “I know me mum will be missing me.”

“Of course, dear. It is a special honor to be invited to come into Faery. Time is different here, and when you do go home, it will be as if no time at all has passed. Your mum will not even know you have been gone.”

“How does that happen?” Avalon asked.

Llynna smiled to herself as she recalled her own memories of her first crossing. “It’s a bit complicated. You popped through a portal that was opened for you. I’m not sure yet who did that. We will figure out what your connection is to Anara and then we will have our answer. When you are ready to go home, you will return on the Dragon Matrix, as it can move around on the timeline.

Avalon began to relax. She kept rubbing Tukka between her eyes. She accepted what Llynna told her. “Me mum told me a lot of stories about Faery. She said elves and faeries and dragons were real in other places beyond our world.” Avalon hesitated for a moment, then said, “I think I know Tukka. From a dream or something.”

Caiden was surprised. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“Inside, I just know we have met before,” Avalon said.

Llynna exchanged a glance with Caiden and raised her eyebrows in surprise. She didn’t want to press Avalon, so decided to let the subject wait for another time. The answers would come when they were ready.

“When I first came here, Avalon, I loved it so much. Chooka and I crossed several times before we decided to come back through and stay. I don’t even know how long ago that was in your time. I knew this was where I belonged, so the decision to stay was an easy one.”

“Didn’t your family miss you?” Avalon asked.

“My parents were gone, and I didn’t have much in the way of family. I was a nurse on the other side so I told those who might wonder where I went that I had taken a position in London. I had also been working with herbs in Scotland. Now I am known as a healer, an apothecary, and a chemist. I work mostly with herbs and medicinal plants commonly known as simples. My nursing experience comes in quite handy at times as well.” She glanced at Caiden’s arm and nodded. Llynna smiled at Avalon as the young girl was taking it all in. She really liked her and was delighted by this unusual turn of events. So this was what she had been feeling. No one was allowed to come straight into Faery, so Avalon must be very special beyond her name. It must have great significance. Someone knew something. She would have to find out who, as well as square it with the Faery Court as rules had been broken.

“Why, Lin ya, Lin ya, do we have company?” asked a singsong voice from the kitchen doorway.

Avalon spun around and was amazed to see two creatures half her size by the door. The larger one had an earthy brownish green tinge to his skin, a rather large nose, wide set brown eyes and bushy eyebrows, wide lips and a mop of wild hair held in check by a woolen cap pulled down to his brow. The smaller of the two had a more feminine look, with the same features. They were both dressed in homespun fabrics and wore leather boots. She stood up shyly and stared.

Llynna laughed out loud. “I was wondering how long it would take you two to show up.”

The taller one started talking first. His voice was thick with excitement.

“Well, the news is traveling at the speed of elfshot. A black cat has come through with Eldon, and they say he is the Messenger. Shadikar picked up two boys near Ravenscroft Forest, and Snowdrop just told us that a young girl popped into the field above your house. That is just for starters. The apprentice from the Seven Sisters is coming back, and two brothers, or is it two sisters, are coming. Aylith says there are several others on their way but that it is a secret. Isn’t that exciting?”

“It is exciting. Where did you see Aylith?”

“We just left her in the woods a little while ago.”

“Oh, good. I’m glad she is close.” Llynna said. Looking at Caiden, as he took a seat at the table, “I could feel something, just wasn’t sure what it was. This is bigger than I thought.” He nodded. Then in a scolding manner, she addressed the elementals. “As for the two of you, it is pretty hard to keep any secrets around here if you two are involved.”

“Well, what is the fun of a secret if no one knows?” asked the smaller one with complete innocence.

“Well, it would hardly be a secret if you told everyone, would it?” snapped the bigger one.

Used to their squabbling, a change of subject was needed. “Let me introduce you to our new guest. This is Avalon. She is twelve years old and not quite sure how she got here. We will have to figure that out.”

“Avalon, I would like to introduce Pogy and Sweet Pea. They are elemental beings from the woodlands and live down by the creek. They are cousins.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Avalon said, grinning.

Pogy stepped forward and offered his hand for a shake. Sweet Pea had a moment of shyness and stood behind her cousin, smiling at the girl. Avalon extended her hand in greeting.

“Have you seen Snowdrop? Llynna asked.

“Well, she was just in the forest with us, but as soon as she told us what had happened, we popped over here.” As if on cue, a snowy white owl with large yellow eyes and dark scalloping on her chest and wings landed on the kitchen windowsill, knocking a potted plant into the sink.

“Ah, I was wondering where you were, Snowdrop. Seems like big things are happening. I would like to send a message to Aylith to let her know I need to talk to her.”

Llynna pulled out a scroll tucked into a pouch that Snowdrop wore and scribbled out a message. Putting it back in the pouch, she fed the owl some jerky. “Thank you, Snowdrop. I would appreciate it if you would take this to her right away.” With a great flutter of her strong wings, the owl lifted off, knocking over another herb pot on the windowsill as she left.

The smaller of the two beings piped up and said “My name is Sweet Pea, but everybody calls me Pea Wee.”

“May I call you Pea Wee?” Avalon asked.

“Yes, please,” she said.

“Now you can see why I would like you to stay out of the mud. Here we are meeting someone new, and you are all muddy. Well, we all live in the creek, don’t we, but most of us manage to stay out of the mud,” Pogy said with disdain. “Just once, I would like to see you stay clean all day, Pea Wee.”

“Oh, Pogy, it is just who she is. You know that. Besides, who would you pick on if Pea Wee didn’t play in the mud?” Llynya said.

“I don’t pick on her.” He said defensively.

“Oh yes you do, and” Pea Wee said.

Llynya decided to head off another one of their constant squabbles and interrupted them. “Now you two, that’s enough for now. Would you like to join us for some tea and scones?”

In unison, they clapped and said “yes, yes, yes.”

“I also have some nice sandwiches and bread with honey. You know where your teacups are. You can all help us get set up. Avalon, please take this tray over to the table while I put the kettle on. Not too close to Tukka, though, or we won’t have much left for ourselves.” Llynya remembered what a magical experience it had been her first time in Faery as she watched Avalon’s total delight.

When all was ready, they sat down at the table with Chooka curled up at Avalon’s feet. Pogy and Sweet Pea sat on the windowsill, with Tukka between them. As everyone helped themselves to scones, Avalon seemed to finally relax. Llynya passed around the sandwich plate. She had cut some of the sandwiches in smaller pieces for the elementals. “Are you alright, dear?” Llynya asked. Avalon’s eyes had grown as big as goblin fruit and she had a worried expression on her face.

“I think so. Am I dreaming? Is this real? I must be dreaming, right?”

“It felt like that to me, too, the first time. You’ll be fine. I have a lovely featherbed in one of the guest rooms that I know you will like, and I’m sure Chooka will want to stay with you.”

“*Lin ya*, can we take her down to the creek and show her where we live when tea is over?” asked Pea Wee. Avalon’s eye lit up.

“Would you like to do that Avalon?” The young girl nodded. Addressing Pogy, Llynya said, “She has to be back here by owl’s light, ok, and take Chooka. Avalon has had a big day and she has a cold. I’ll need to make up a poultice for her this evening after her bath.”

With that, the undines started twittering again and Avalon looked like she was going to burst with excitement. As everyone busied themselves with the tea, Llynya smiled. She could feel the goosebumps up and down her arms. Visitors were being brought into Faery. It had been years since that had happened. She could feel the power of it now. Tomorrow held the promise of more revelations. One thing was obvious. Avalon had forgotten all about going home.