

MAIDEN

GEORGIA LEIGHTON



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*For Zachary:
you are pure magic*

Even in merely reading a fairytale, we must let go our daylight convictions and trust ourselves to be guided by dark figures, in silence; and when we come back, it may be very hard to describe where we have been.

Ursula K. Le Guin

Prologue

THE TALE OF PRINCESS TIANNIE

SHE CLIMBED THROUGH the fine mist that hung in the air, veiling the mountainside in a sheet of soft silver. Breath heaved from her chest, rising like puffs of smoke, while dawn light stretched pale fingers over the surrounding mountains, lacing between the stacks and valleys, its amber warmth slowly spreading. Her shoes fumbled and slid on the soft, pebbly ground, and her broken body burned with pain. She did not think that she could go on, but she knew that she must. The lives of her people depended on it.

Behind her, she could hear faint echoes of the battle still raging lower down the mountain: clashing swords, smashing shields and screams of torture. Though she had fled the front line, the stench of blood, flesh and death lingered, clogging her nose and choking her throat, her ears still ringing with wails of agony.

Her people had been fighting this foreign enemy for almost twenty days. It was said that another settlement in the south had

simply folded at the sight of the sprawling army that had suddenly appeared in these lands, their Leader bending the knee before even one sword had been drawn. But the Mountain folk had vowed that they would not give in so easily. They had fought, though it had cost them dearly. And as each day passed and each battle was lost, they had been driven further up the mountains, retreating high into the stony peaks.

Tiannie snatched at rocks as she climbed, propelling herself onwards. Above her, golden light poured into the valleys and ridges below. She had been fighting all night alongside her people, watching their men and women fall, writhing bodies spurting blood and guts into the mud-churned soil. Fewer than one hundred of the Mountain folk warriors remained and their numbers were quickly dwindling. This enemy would triumph, despite their efforts, and when it did, the rest of their people would not be safe. The enemy would find the remaining Mountain folk hiding in the forests – those who were too old, too young or unable to fight – and they would slaughter them.

Five days ago, they had lost their Leader. She had been just six paces from him when it happened, and she had seen the swinging blow that decapitated her father. She had screamed and launched herself upon his murderer, driving a spear through the soldier's chest. But it could not change what had already been done. Her father's head had rolled away and, before she could retrieve his corpse, the horns had sounded, calling the Mountain folk to retreat into the trees once more. With his death, the burden of command had fallen to her, the eldest child. Now she was their Leader and she had to do something to save her people.

Tiannie's right foot slipped and she fell, her chin smacking the ground. Tears filled her eyes. She tried to stagger upright again, but

her legs buckled. Her body ached with fatigue and sorrow. She had come as far as she could, and this would have to be enough.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. The thudding of her heartbeat filled her ears, but she ignored it, sinking deeper inside her thoughts. She stilled and drew upon an instinctive, ancient part of herself.

I am here.

She spoke in a mixture of sounds, thoughts and gestures, the words vibrating through her form into the sharp, thin air. It was her Gift.

I call upon the Great Dragon.

All remained quiet. The Mountain folk did not often ascend into the territory of the dragons, unless they were looking for trouble, and Tiannie had never dared climb as high as this before.

I call upon the Great Dragon, she repeated, opening her eyes. *Let him show himself!*

A lovetail swooped in the sky above, a rare flash of brightness against the scrubby landscape. It had been a long time since Tiannie had seen something so beautiful. She watched it chirp and whirl, paws pedalling the air, webbed wings fluttering. Lovetails were meant to be a sign of good fortune. And good fortune was what she needed.

The ground beneath her shuddered.

Tiannie gasped and scrambled to her feet.

A blast of fire shot through the air, engulfing the lovetail, and it blackened to ash.

From high above came a deafening roar. A hulking dark shape slithered down the mountainside, scattering trees and boulders like pebbles.

Tiannie felt for her sword, but the scabbard was empty. She had

left her blade on the battlefield, thrown down in despair by the lifeless body of her younger brother.

Who dares call upon my name? The dragon's voice was like the snap of flames and the rumbling hiss of steam.

Tiannie had heard stories of the Great Dragon passed down between Mountain folk, sightings of a vast, soaring shadow in the sky, but she did not know of anyone who had faced the creature as she did now and lived to tell the tale. She stared at the huge, powerful beast, far larger and mightier than any she had ever seen. Burnished red scales glinted in the pale light, covering its hide in overlapping hexagonal patterns. Black hair sprouted from its chin, fine and curved like eyelashes, and a pair of enormous wings jutted from its shoulders, leathery and sinewy, hooked claws coiling from the boned edges, their speared ends flashing in the dawn light.

Tiannie swallowed back a scream of fear. She told herself that if she did not do this, the Mountain folk would perish. She had to try to save what was left of her people. She must be brave.

I am Princess Tiannie, she replied. I have come to ask for your aid.

She collapsed into a bow, throwing her arms out wide, hoping the extravagance of the gesture might flatter the creature.

The Great Dragon's huge nostrils flared and its vertical, slit-shaped eyes wavered.

A human who can speak the ancient language? it replied, its voice slow and deep, like no creature or beast she had ever heard before. *Interesting. But I have no desire to aid the likes of you.*

Desperation made Tiannie bold. *The Great Creator appointed you as guardian of the mountains,* she said, reciting the lore of the Mountain folk. *A foreign enemy is threatening this land and my people. You must help.*

A growl like the roll of thunder juddered from the creature's

long throat. *I must do nothing*, it hissed. *I would not save those who have the blood of my kin on their hands.*

Tiannie could not deny it. She had hunted dragons with her people on occasion – simpler beasts than the ancient creature before her now. Once she had even proudly slain a small dragon with her own sword. She was that rare thing, held in awe: a Dragonslayer.

The dragons were in our territory—

You have no territory! roared the Great Dragon, darting forward so that its jaw hovered inches from her face, its lipless mouth pulled back to reveal rows of fangs as long as her arms. *I have guarded these mountains since the beginning. Your kind come and go.*

Tiannie stumbled away. Heat spun off the creature in waves, filling the air with a burning stench. It was like standing before a seething fire.

Please, I beg of you, she cried. *Save my people. I will do anything.*

She thought of her little sister, the only family she had left. The child had just learnt to walk, wobbling on chubby, stumbling feet. It was too horrific to think what might happen to the girl at the hands of the enemy.

The Great Dragon shifted, its haunches flexing. It regarded her with an unblinking, yellow gaze. Finally, it hissed, *Perhaps we can reach an agreement.*

Hope and unease flared together in Tiannie's chest. To enter into a bargain with an ancient creature like the Great Dragon was surely perilous. Mountain folk were afraid of the beasts and Fae who roamed their lands – those they called the Hidden People. Mountain children were taught never to speak to a nymph, a brownie or a troll: such creatures of chaos and pain. But above all, they were taught to fear the Great Dragon, a being as powerful and ancient as the very mountains themselves.

Princess?

She pushed aside her misgivings. She did not have a choice. *State your terms.*

The Great Dragon arched its neck, revealing a glimpse of a burning red throat. *I will threaten your enemy with merciless attacks if they do not retreat. They may take the surrounding lands as their own, but they cannot have the mountains – those will belong to your kind and mine.*

Tiannie almost choked on hope. She thought of her people hiding in the forest, watching their loved ones lose the recent battle, knowing they would be sought out and slaughtered next. An end to their suffering sounded almost too good to be true, and she knew there would be a price to pay.

What do you want in return?

The Great Dragon made a ticking sound and a curl of smoke oozed from its lips. *You and your people*, it replied.

Tiannie paused, her unease souring into dread. *What do you mean?* she asked.

Today and on the first day of each spring, you must send one of your kind to me before sunset. If you do not, the treaty will be broken and all of you will face my wrath.

Distantly, they heard the loud blast of a trumpet followed by the beating of a drum. It was a foreign, unfamiliar sound. The enemy were moving forward.

Do we have an agreement? asked the Great Dragon.

I do not fully understand the terms—

The Great Dragon snapped its huge jaw and the edges of its wings quivered, as if it might launch itself away.

Wait! cried Tiannie, holding out her arms. *All right, yes. I . . . I agree to the terms.*

The air quivered, slightly at first, then more strongly, a pulse rolling outward, gathering force and momentum. The ground shuddered, the sky rang with power and the very realm itself seemed to vibrate with a deep, resonant hum. The light wavered and bent, colours bleeding into one another, rippling through the dawn like the aftershock of something vast and unstoppable.

Then all was still.

Our bargain is made, Mountain Princess. The Great Dragon raised its head in the direction of the drumbeats. *I will follow you now and you will explain the treaty to your enemy. If they harm you, I will destroy them.*

Pure relief settled over Tiannie, cool and soothing. The sight of the Great Dragon would terrify the enemy into agreeing to the terms of the Mountain folk's surrender. There would be no more bloodshed. Her people would survive. They would still have the mountains.

Then you will return with me, added the Great Dragon.

Tiannie looked at the beast's thick, muscled limbs and its curved, glinting fangs. She had seen a dragon less than half its size tear a man into strips. She had killed a much smaller dragon and she knew their strength and stealth.

What will you do with me? she asked.

The Great Dragon's yellow gaze bore down upon her. *You will be the first sacrifice,* it said. *You will be mine.*

PART ONE

The Princess and the Squire

Alinore

ALINORE HAD BEEN told that there were dragons in the north. Her maid said that they skulked through the mountainous borders of Calestra, weaving between stacks and crouching in caves. They made that most northern, sparse region of the United Kingdoms of Galasque notable. They were the cause of Calestra's notorious spring tradition: the Maiden Sacrifice – a grisly custom from long ago in which a girl was forfeited in an ancient treaty. But however gruesome it all sounded, Alinore could not help but be fascinated by such elusive beasts that had roamed the realm long before the land was invaded, conquered and divided. She imagined fierce, lithe creatures flitting amid rocky peaks and tapering shadows swooping against a pale sky.

She had heard of sea dragons, mighty beasts that undulated in the depths of the oceans, surfacing only to drag unsuspecting ships to their watery end. But her father said that sea dragons were mere myth and if such creatures had ever existed, they were now extinct. He had certainly never come across any during his extensive travels.

Alinore had once seen a doll dragon, a miniature reptilian with sharp scales and needle teeth brought caged to her father's villa by a merchant intending to sell it as an exotic pet. Her father had said that dogs and horses were the only pets he needed, and he had sent the man away, but not before Alinore had glimpsed a thin, lizard-like creature with a tufted beard and glinting eyes.

But she had never seen a *real* dragon.

So when her father announced that they were to travel together to visit the King of Calestra in the north region, Alinore was delighted. Apart from one trip to the High King's court when she was six winters old, Alinore had not left their villa on the outskirts of the central region of Galasque. This was her chance to visit parts of the country she had only seen on maps in their library. This was her chance to spend time with her father who was always away, fighting battles and attending to the orders of Lord Lassiaro and the High King.

But most importantly of all, this was her chance to see a dragon.

Alinore had started the journey north full of enthusiasm. She sat tall in the saddle and took note of all the towns and villages they passed, making their way north through three of the seven different regions that formed the United Kingdoms of Galasque. But after just a few days of relentless travel, the dusty roads and saddle sores began wearing her down, until, soon, there was little zeal left. It was the end of winter and the lands they passed were bleak and nondescript: rows of olive trees, stark fields and grey skies.

Everywhere looked the same.

Alinore kept herself entertained dreaming of dragons and asking her father to repeat her favourite tale from his time fighting for the High King in the Upper Northern Realm. When home, her father would often regale her with accounts of his battles and travels.

Alinore loved nothing more than sitting at his feet, listening to his stories. Undoubtably the most thrilling was the tale of the Battle of Rowlyn when a dragon had attacked from the sky at the bidding of a handler. Her father said he had never seen anything as majestic and terrifying. The dragon had webbed wings, a muscular, scaled body and long, curved fangs. It had taken many soldiers to defeat such a beast and the final blow had been at the hands of her father. ‘The trick is to strike the throat,’ he always told her. ‘You have to stop the creature spitting out fire.’ Then a reenactment of the fatal attack would follow. Alinore made her father repeat the tale so often on their journey to Calestra that she could soon recite it verbatim – much to the dissatisfaction of her maid, who said that such horrid tales were not right for little girls.

After five long days on the road, when they did finally cross the border into the Kingdom of Calestra, Alinore looked about her eagerly. Standing up in the stirrups of her pony, she peered at the farmland, expecting great, winged shadows in the sky and streams of burning red fire. But she saw nothing. Not even scorch marks or shed scales. The further their party travelled through that region, the more her disappointment sharpened.

Finally, she could bear it no longer and broke formation to canter ahead on her pony. Drawing up alongside her father’s warhorse, she demanded to know where the dragons were hiding. Her father laughed his hearty laugh and, despite her disobedience, he did not send her back to ride with her maid. Instead, she was permitted to trot with him at the head of the party – just in case a dragon was spotted on the horizon.

Alinore did not see such a creature but, when she first caught sight of the Calestran mountains, she was struck with wonder all the same. The tall, serrated arches of rock were so different from

the flat grasslands of her home. The mountains were like something from a bedtime storybook, and the further they travelled towards them, the more towering and magnificent they became. Alinore found herself gazing at them constantly; watching the dappled shadows of clouds shift across their broad expanse. She was so consumed with the mountains that she did not see the city of Tormale until they were almost upon it.

Walls bronzed by wintery sunlight appeared and the capital of Calestra rose behind them, swelling from the undulating, dusty ground. It was not as big as Foresquia, the capital of the Galasque region, and behind its walls Tormale appeared much like other places Alinore had seen on their journey: snaking streets of slums that turned into wide squares of tall, stone buildings with people rushing and bustling everywhere. It would not have been a remarkable place at all except for the mountains that soared at its back. They towered over everything, silent and watchful.

Alinore kept her pony close to her father's warhorse as their party skirted the edges of Tormale. They followed the banks of a river north, rising from the slums in the valley to wider, cleaner streets. Barefoot, tatty children scurried out to watch them, and passers-by on the road stared at the grand procession. Alinore saw one man in a wagon tap the shoulder of a boy at his side and point at her father. 'A knight,' she saw the man mouth and then add, 'With a Galasque medallion.'

She smiled to herself.

The ground was beginning to level when they turned into a vast, cobbled square and her father said, 'Alinore, look. There's Syonno Castle.'

Alinore raised her head to see a tall building of bronze stone with symmetrical square turrets at each corner. Crenellations topped its

battlements like the crinkled edge of a pie, and the purple banner of Calestra fluttered at its entrance, the emblem of a golden dragon just visible at its centre. It looked grand enough, she supposed, but nothing like the High King's palace that she had once visited in Foresquia.

'It's a bit small.'

'Alinore!'

Alinore licked her lips and tried again. 'It looks very . . . neat.'

'It's an honour to stay with His Majesty King Borto.' Her father sounded unusually stern. 'You will represent the House of Mattinias – you will represent me – and I expect you to be on your best behaviour.'

'Yes, Father.'

They rode through the gates of the castle into a courtyard where grooms and stable boys waited, poised to attend them. Then reins were flung aside, packs were hauled from saddles and the horses tossed their heads and stretched their necks in relief.

Alinore dismounted and followed her father inside. Syonno Castle might not be as impressive as her memory of the High King's palace, but it was certainly older and grander than what she was used to at home. Trotting at the heels of her father, she passed through long corridors thick with rugs and winding passageways of terracotta tiles, their walls cluttered with paintings.

At last, they stopped at a set of double doors bordered by guards. Alinore shuffled her feet as her father spoke to an attendant. She had been so excited about the journey – and the prospect of dragons – that she had not thought much about this visit. She was not exactly sure what she needed to do or say. Her maid had tried to give her some instructions during their travels, but it had all been so boring that Alinore had found it hard to listen.

Her father looked down and caught her eye. He winked.

‘Sir Thomaso, House of Mattinias,’ called the attendant. ‘Entering the private salon of King Borto Donolaino.’

The doors were pulled open and Alinore followed her father into a large, wide room. It was so bright after the shadows of the corridors that Alinore’s eyes had not even adjusted before she heard a loud voice booming, ‘Thom! Thom, you’re finally here!’

A tall, dark-haired man strode towards them, large hands outstretched. He wore an emerald-coloured shirt with puffed sleeves and his accent was deep and quick. Alinore had to listen carefully to understand his rapid, clipped Galasquese.

‘Peace be with Your Majesty, King Borto Donolaino of Calestra,’ said her father and bent into a low bow.

Alinore hurriedly dropped into a curtsey too, but no one seemed to notice her.

‘Thom, I’m delighted to see you here finally, *finally*. I have longed for you to visit for so many winters. What’s taken you so long?’ Without waiting for an answer, King Borto called over his shoulder, ‘My Queen, this is the man I’ve always told you about. He’s come to visit us in the depths of the north.’

A slight, pretty woman standing by a window smiled at them. She had hair the colour of midnight and startling amber eyes. Alinore did not know much about clothes, but the woman’s dress was brightly coloured and full of frills like the maidens in portraits in her father’s study.

‘Peace be with Your Majesty, Queen Flavria Donolaino of Calestra,’ said her father, bowing again.

He had barely straightened before King Borto flung a thick arm around his neck and said, ‘I want to introduce you to my boys. I have two, can you believe it? I didn’t have any when we

last rode out together – it must have been almost fifteen winters ago.'

'We're surely not so old, Your Majesty.'

King Borto let out a thunderclap of laughter. 'This is my eldest, Prince Samsel, who is fourteen winters,' he said, gesturing at a boy sprawled on a nearby chair. 'And this is my youngest, Prince Ottone, who is thirteen winters.' He pointed at another boy who sat cross-legged on the floor, fiddling with tats cards.

They were both black-haired and dark-eyed like the King.

'Thom and I fought together in the High King's army way back when,' bellowed King Borto, steering Alinore's father closer to his sons.

'Who were you fighting?' asked Prince Samsel. He was lounging on a plump brocade armchair, his legs kicking up at the ceiling.

'It was some dispute over Journier,' replied the King. 'One of the many. But quickly resolved after we knocked them back a few paces.'

Alinore knew Journier; it was a country that appeared often in her father's tales of warfare. It lay to the north of the Kingdoms of Galasque, on the other side of the vast mountains that could be seen from Syonno Castle's windows. Bordered by five countries and without a ruling monarch, ownership of Journier was always in dispute.

'Did you win the battle?' asked Prince Ottone.

'Yes – no.' The King scratched at his beard. 'Sort of . . .'

'It was one of the many Journier feuds, Your Majesty,' Alinore's father quickly added. 'I think we all agreed to retreat in the end, but that last battle was falling in our favour, to be sure.'

King Borto thumped his back.

'You should greet our guests properly, my sons,' called the soft

voice of the Queen. Her Galasquese accent was smoother than the rest of her family, and closer to Alinore's own. Alinore vaguely remembered being told by her maid that Queen Flavria had been born in the region of Carniva further south.

'Indeed,' added King Borto. 'Some manners you are showing.'

The Princes scrambled up, brushing off their tunics, and stood, all gangly limbs and pointy elbows. Alinore's father grinned at them and made encouraging noises, praising their health and strength.

'My King, you must introduce our daughter.'

King Borto turned in surprise to his wife. 'Oh, yes . . .' His eyes drifted across the salon and landed on a window seat in the far corner. 'Come here, my dear,' he called.

The curtains at the window twitched and a girl emerged, small and delicate. She had the same black hair and amber eyes as the Queen, and she was wearing an identical, smaller dress with bows and frills.

'A perfect Princess as well as two strapping Princes, you have been truly blessed, Your Majesty,' said Alinore's father.

King Borto laughed and scratched his beard.

'This is Princess Cressyda,' said the Queen when her husband remained quiet.

'It's a pleasure, Princess,' replied Alinore's father. 'I'm guessing you must be about the same age as my own daughter. Might you have lived through twelve winters?'

Her solemn face broke into a shy smile and she nodded.

'That's just the same as my daughter. Princess, may I introduce you to Lady Alinore, House of Mattinias.'

For the first time, Alinore felt the many sets of eyes in the room turn to her. She attempted her very best curtsey, uncurling with a

flourish. Her maid always said the wrist flick was unnecessary, but Alinore felt it gave her a certain mysterious individuality.

‘We are honoured to be your guests, Your Majesty,’ said her father. ‘And I am greatly indebted to you, allowing my daughter a place in your household during my crusade in the name of our High King.’

Alinore started in surprise. She had assumed that she would stay at Syonno Castle with her father. He had not mentioned that he was due to go to war again. She turned to him in confusion, but he had his back to her.

‘Can you stay with us for a while, Thom?’ asked King Borto. ‘It’s our two-hundred-and-ninety-fourth Maiden Sacrifice next moon. You could be our guest of honour.’

‘Sadly I cannot stay, Your Majesty. Our High King has called me to his army—’

‘Of course, Thom. Of course,’ said King Borto, waving a large hand through the air. ‘More fighting over Journier and this time the Diaspass Kingdom is helping the Journian rebels attempt independence, the fools.’ He shook his head. ‘We need you ensuring they don’t encroach on our territory. Only wish I could join you.’

He glanced at the Queen, who shook her head. King Borto sighed; then he began offering around drinks.

As quickly as the gazes of all in the room had fallen upon Alinore, they left. King Borto invited her father to sit in one of the many ornate armchairs and began reminiscing about battles of their past, while the Queen listened politely and the Princes crowded around, eager for details of glory and gore. Normally Alinore would be keen to hear such tales herself too, but she stood at the edge of the room, forgotten.

Then a flutter of movement caught her attention.

She raised her head.

The Princess was watching, pinning her with an amber-eyed, level stare.

Alinore felt a blush rise to her cheeks, although she did not know why.

She smiled, but the Princess looked away.

Cressyda

THE FELT DRAGON figurine hung limply from Cressyda's hands. She clutched at it more tightly, her palms so slick with sweat that the purple dye had begun to stain her skin. It was stiflingly hot for the first day of spring, even in the coolness of the Sanctuary. Cressyda longed to take off the thick beaded jacket laced around her shoulders, but Queen Flavria had said that the dark blue over-coat was the finest element of their matching outfits, so it must stay on.

The tap of footsteps sounded on tile.

Master Jakespurcia walked down the aisle of the Sanctuary towards her, the edge of his black Masterhood cloak rippling at his ankles. The red ribbons strung from the ceiling brushed his shoulders as he passed.

'Good morning, Princess,' he said, stopping with a bow. 'Her Majesty told me that we have some work to do this morning?'

'Yes. It's my eyes.'

Master Jakespurcia leant closer to her, and she tried not to breathe

in his scent of musty robes, dried sweat and the unmistakable, bitter smell of magic.

‘Ah yes,’ he said. ‘I see that they’re losing their colour. Come with me.’

She followed him through one of the archways at the back of the Sanctuary into a narrow, dank room overflowing with books and scrolls. As the door shut behind them, she heard the first mid-morning prayer chant from the priests on the balconies overlooking the apse. It would not be long before the Maiden Sacrifice service began, followed by the procession through the city to Tormale’s main square for the ceremony.

Cressyda looked down at the dragon figurine in her hands and felt sick. The whole thing was barbaric. Sometimes there were petitions to seek an end to the treaty, but no one wanted the wrath of the Great Dragon brought down upon Calestra. So they went along with it each spring, trying to get the whole dreaded thing over with as quickly as possible.

‘Now, when was your last enhancement?’ muttered Master Jakespuria, riffling through scraps of parchment on a cluttered wooden desk. ‘We mustn’t overdo it. I know you want to look your best, but at twelve winters old, you’re still very young, Princess.’

They both knew that she was here at the Queen’s wishes, not her own, but still they went through this charade every time. Cressyda sensed that Master Jakespuria did not wholly approve of the many charms and glamours layered upon her. There were rules around the frequency of beauty enhancements in the Kingdoms of Galasque, and Cressyda had often overheard ladies-in-waiting swapping names in hushed voices of magic-wielders who would perform extra, forbidden spells at a price. But she had never known

Master Jakespurcia refuse her mother an enhancement. Such rules clearly did not apply to Her Majesty.

‘It was three moons ago . . .’ said Master Jakespurcia, tapping a finger on his bearded chin. ‘I suppose we can add a little something extra. But too much is dangerous, Princess. Too many enhancements could permanently damage your appearance.’

Cressyda dutifully nodded. If it were up to her, she would not be here at all. Sometimes she caught sight of herself in one of the many mirrors in her mother’s bedchamber and, pausing, she would stare into her bright, amber eyes, wondering what she would look like without all the magic. What she *really* looked like. It was a peculiar, unsettling thought, but one she would never dare utter aloud.

A young girl of five winters called Klariella had recently arrived at court and captured Queen Flavria’s ever-shifting attention. The Queen dressed Klariella in Cressyda’s old dresses – the ones that no longer fitted – fussing and cooing over the pretty little thing, taking the child on her lap and carrying her from room to room. Cressyda tried to assure herself that it was harmless, and Klariella was just another of her mother’s protégées. There had been several of them the last few winters: delicate, neat little girls to be stroked and nuzzled for a season, then cast aside. When Lady Alinore had arrived at the Calestran court a moon ago, Cressyda had assumed she too would become one of the Queen’s curiosities. But either Lady Alinore was too old to take Queen Flavria’s fancy, or her gawkiness was off-putting enough for the Queen to leave her to her own devices. Because Lady Alinore was certainly odd: unmannered and outspoken. Cressyda had overheard one courtly lady snigger to another that the girl was ‘almost feral’. But her presence at court still made Cressyda nervous. Queen Flavria’s whims were fickle and Cressyda could never risk being replaced.

Still, at least when the Queen was occupied with her playthings, she was not sinking inward. Brooding into one of her ‘malaise of spirits’ where she took to her bed with an ailment – a headache, joint pain or a fever – and stayed there for days and days. At such times it fell to Cressyda to soothe the Queen, sitting in a darkened room, clutching damp hands in long, thick silences. She had learnt long ago that her mother’s happiness was a fragile thing, a delicate glass spun too thin. It was her duty to keep it from cracking. To smile, to flatter, to obey without hesitation. That was what she was for.

‘Just a moment, Princess.’

Cressyda waited as Master Jakespurcia took a pot from the stone windowsill and placed it on a nearby desk. It contained a small rose bush with three blooming pink flowers, their nodding heads bent under the weight of their frothy petals.

‘Stand still, Princess. Look ahead.’

Taking a deep breath, Cressyda lifted her chin and braced herself.

Master Jakespurcia flicked the edges of his black cloak and raised his hands, stretching and flexing his fingers. A low, guttural noise arose from his mouth, the sounds harsh and distorted: the language of magic.

The warm air in the room grew hotter. Sticky and heavy, it seemed to clot and congeal. It pressed upon Cressyda, growing steadily stronger, like several winds blowing in different directions, roaring with energy. It was not painful exactly, but it was not comfortable either. She winced as something tacky and cloying coated her skin.

Then all became still.

Master Jakespurcia cleared his throat. ‘All finished.’

Cressyda twitched; her face felt tight and itchy. She noticed that

the rose bush on the desk had lost one of its flowers. The bloom had shrivelled to nothing. She knew it was called energy transfer. One of Master Jakespurcia's apprentices had conducted a few lessons on it in the castle's schoolroom last winter. Energy transfer was the main principle of magic and a skill that must be studied throughout a Master's lifetime.

'Thank you, Master Jakespurcia Magnamion the Patient,' she said because she knew she ought to.

Master Jakespurcia bowed. 'Now you're ready for the upcoming celebrations,' he said. His eyes fell upon the felt dragon in her hands. 'A Maiden Sacrifice totem. You made that yourself, Princess?'

'Yes.' Cressyda uncurled her fingers to reveal the purple dragon figurine, tiny scales embroidered upon its sides and threads of red, orange and yellow spurting from its mouth like flames. It had taken her two days of diligent stitching.

'Very fine work, Princess. It seems a shame that it'll be tossed into the fires.'

Cressyda did not reply. She thought the part of the Maiden Sacrifice ceremony where the children came forward and threw the dragon totems into the bonfires was probably the most enjoyable of the whole miserable service.

'Is there anything else I can do for you, Princess?'

Cressyda raised her head and looked at the old Master. He was a short, thin man with long, silvery hair that he wore oiled and braided. Deep lines scored his face and hands – unusual at the Calestran court where most nobles bore some sort of beauty enhancement.

'I wondered if . . .'

'Yes?'

But Cressyda could not quite pluck up the courage to do it.

Whenever she was alone with Master Jakespurcia, her heartbeat would quicken, and the words she so desperately wanted to speak would teeter on the edge of her tongue. She longed to ask him the truth. The truth of where she had come from – the truth of who she *really* was. But she could never quite bring herself to do it.

‘Princess?’ Master Jakespurcia pressed.

Cressyda shook her head. ‘That’s all, thank you.’

Master Jakespurcia bowed. ‘I must get ready for the Maiden Sacrifice now.’ He began riffling through the assortment of books and papers piled around the room.

It was Cressyda’s cue to leave. She had missed her chance. Again.

She moved towards the door, cursing herself silently for not being bolder, not speaking when the opportunity had been right in front of her. A thousand things she could have said spun uselessly in her mind, tangled with frustration and shame. She was so wrapped up in her own bitter thoughts that she barely registered the change in the air – a shift so slight it could have been a trick of her imagination.

But then she saw it.

A shadow stirred near the threshold, darker than the dimness around it, and for a breathless moment she thought it might just be the play of sunlight against the uneven stone. Yet it moved again, sliding and stretching, flickering up the wall. Its edges were tattered and its features remained undefined, a blur of menace that seemed to pulse with a life of its own.

Goosebumps prickled her arms and a hot flush of fear rose to her cheeks. Cressyda had seen things like this for as long as she could remember: faint shapes drifting at the edges of her vision that no one else took notice of. She had learnt to ignore them; to pretend that she did not see hazy, soft forms flickering at the corners of

her eyes, or hear hissing, clacking voices echoing through the castle walls. She knew without asking that it was strange and wrong. But she had never come across a shadow like this before: so close and so vivid.

She screamed.

The shadow wavered. Its tall, slender form seemed to look directly at Cressyda, as though in surprise. The longer she stared at it, the more it began to take shape. A terrible face appeared: a woman, red-eyed and weeping.

Greetings, it hissed.

The word was like a nail scratching through Cressyda's head, at once vibrant and terrible. She had heard faint whisperings from these creatures around the castle in the past, but none had ever spoken directly to her before. The sensation filled her mouth with a bitter, sharp taste that made her want to vomit.

‘Princess? What’s wrong?’ Master Jakespurcia grabbed hold of her arm and she jolted backwards, hitting her head on a shelf of books. The blow broke her gaze and when she looked up again, the shadow had vanished.

Cressyda felt a rush of woozy relief.

It was gone.

But her body still shook with the shock. She could not forget that horrible, ghostly face, awful and gaunt. It was different to the creature she sometimes saw in the nursery, which was squat and bandy-legged with talons like long, curved needles. And unlike the shadow that haunted the south turret, which was tiny and slithering with a deep, whistly voice. This creature had looked almost like a woman.

‘Princess?’

She turned to Master Jakespurcia, every muscle in her body rigid,

and forced herself to meet his gaze. Her breathing was ragged, each inhale catching in her chest, but she wrestled it into something that resembled calm. Summoning what little composure she had left, she shaped her trembling lips into a smile.

‘I just . . . I just felt sick, Master,’ she said.

He watched her closely. Something like suspicion flashed across his features.

‘Are you all right, Princess? Did you . . . *see* something?’

Cressyda did not want to tell Master Jakespurcia about the shadows. Instinctively she knew it was not something that she should share with anyone. Least of all a Master. Besides, she was not sure she could even explain what it was that she saw and heard. All she knew was that it was strange and horrible – it was wrong.

‘I saw nothing, Master.’

‘Are you sure—’

But Cressyda was already hurrying away, her tight, stiff clothes rustling. ‘I saw nothing,’ she called again over her shoulder. ‘Nothing!’