
ENDLING
BOOK TWO
THE FIRST

For Michael

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THE FIRST

KATHERINE
APPLEGATE



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The first and greatest victory is to conquer yourself.
– Plato

endling
noun ~ end•ling ~ \`en(d)-ling\

1. the last living individual in a species,
   or, occasionally, a subspecies.
2. the official public ceremony at which
   a species is declared extinct; a eumony.
3. (informal) someone undertaking a
   doomed or quixotic quest.

– *Imperial Lexica Officio of Nedarra*, 3rd edition

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PART ONE

FEELING FEAR

CHAPTER 1

Feel Fear. Choose Courage.

I'm not brave. Not bold. Not a leader.

I'm not remarkable in any way, to tell you the truth.

Unless you count the fact that I may well be the last member of my species, the dairnes.

An endling.

I can tell you what bravery looks like, though.

Bravery is single-handedly fighting off a horde of venomous serpents in order to save a dairne pup and her little wobbyk companion.

I was that pup. And my saviour was Kharassande Donati, my human leader and dear friend.

I would like to be as daring as Khara, as certain, as fair. But leaders like her are born, not made.

My father, a brave and brilliant leader himself, loved wise sayings and proverbs. He used to tell me and my seven siblings, 'Feel fear, choose courage. That's what makes a leader, pups.'

Well, at least I've perfected the fear part. I am deeply acquainted with the many symptoms of terror: the rippling fur, the icy blood, the frantic heart, the unsheathed claws.

My fellow travellers – Khara, Tobble, Renzo, and Gambler – tell me I am braver than I know. And I have, I suppose, surprised myself sometimes these past few months.

But my little moments of bravado aren't evidence of real courage. They're evidence of good acting. If you ask me, pretending not to be afraid is not the same as true fearlessness. No matter what my friends say.

My strong, loyal, fierce friends. How I love them all! I've lost count of the times they've kept my spirits high on our quest to find more dairnes.

We know the odds are long. Just months ago, my entire pack was wiped out by soldiers – soldiers commanded by the Murdano, the despotic ruler of Nedarra, my homeland. And my pack was hardly the first. All over Nedarra, our numbers have slowly dwindled.

I alone survived that brutal day. Me, the lowest-ranking member. The runt. The least useful. The least helpful.

The least brave.

Although I cling to hope, I fear that I may never see another dairne. It's a dread that stuns me with its ferocity at odd moments, then dulls to an ache, one that throbs like a broken bone, badly healed. A fear I've grown accustomed to, one that travels with me day and night: my ugly, inescapable companion.

Still, it's the new fears, the unexpected ones, that take their biggest toll on me.

Sometimes they come in the dark of night, silent and bloodthirsty.

And sometimes, like yesterday, they circle the skies, lovely, graceful, and deadly.

CHAPTER 2

Razorgulls

All morning, we'd been heading towards icy peaks towering in the distance beyond the Nedarran border – towards our uncertain future, towards my flimsy hopes.

We'd already been walking for three hours, and it had been tough going. It was cold, and grey clouds encircled the mountains, groping for the peaks. Our breath hovered before us like ghosts from our tangled pasts.

The unforgiving cliff face we'd been following had widened out into a patch in the shape of a stubby triangle, and we decided to rest there. Snowy clumps dotted the area, and the vegetation was limp and brown. On two sides of the triangle, soaring cliffs rose hundreds of feet high. The remaining side was open to the sea.

As soon as we paused, a large group of birds sliced through the clouds, wheeling and darting. There were hundreds of them, moving in perfect formation like well-trained soldiers.

'Razorgulls,' Renzo said. 'Keep an eye on them. They have beaks like knives. And they'll steal anything they can get their claws on.'

'Kindred spirits, then?' Khara teased. Renzo was an accomplished thief.

'*I* had to learn my skills,' Renzo said. He patted his odorous dog, Dog, who was sniffing stones with great studiousness. 'With razorgulls, it's pure instinct.'

'They're rather pretty,' said Tobble, the little wobbyk who'd become my closest friend. He had foxlike features in a round face, with a protruding belly, huge oval ears, and wide, dark eyes. His three tails, newly braided – an important rite of passage in wobbyk culture – were tied at the end with a strip of leather.

We watched, mesmerised by the way the red-and-grey birds wheeled and swirled, circling like debris caught in a whirlwind. 'They congregate near mining areas and villages,' Renzo said. 'When they snatch a purse or satchel filled with gems, they head south and unload it on pirate ships. In return, the pirates give them fresh catch.' He shrugged. 'As a thief, I have to admire their style.'

'Why not just fish for themselves?' I asked.

'The same reason pirates don't work as farmers and merchants,' Renzo said. 'Thievery is much more entertaining.'

'I'd hoped to pause and eat here,' Khara said, surveying the area. 'You think it's safe?'

'Safe enough,' Renzo said. 'As long as we don't let our guard down. And we do need some rest.'

'I wouldn't mind a little avian snack,' said Gambler, following the razorgulls with his pale blue felivet eyes. A

sleek black catlike predator, Gambler had delicate white facial stripes and not-so-delicate deadly claws. 'Or just about any kind of snack. Think I'll explore this meadow and see what I come up with.'

'We'll have food ready when you get back, Gambler,' Tobble said, and my stomach whined energetically. (Dairne stomachs do not rumble. They whine, which to my mind is much more dignified.)

'Thank you,' Gambler said, 'but I'm hoping to find something better than biscuits.'

'We have a bit of dried cotchet meat,' Tobble offered.

Gambler nodded. 'Dried means dead. Not the felivet way, Tobble.'

Tobble, who doesn't eat meat, wrinkled his nose, and Gambler took off, moving in his distinctive feline way, which seems simultaneously leisurely and quick.

While I collected twigs and sticks, Tobble unpacked our cooking gear. Soon we had a small fire going, and he was singing under his breath as he retrieved herbs and a small pan.

Tobble had turned out to be the best cook among us. Renzo was good, too, especially when he deployed the little bit of theurgy – magic spells – he'd begun to learn when he'd turned fifteen this year. It didn't amount to much, though: a cold stew turned hot, a bland vegetable seasoned. One night he'd tried to impress us by popping tallin kernels. They'd turned into little fireflies and floated away on the breeze.

They were impressive, all right. Just not edible.

'Theurgy,' Tobble had grumbled as we watched the fireflies head skyward like baby stars. 'A good cook doesn't need magic.' Right then and there, he'd whipped up a batch of kitlattis – a biscuit-like confection that his great-great-great-grandmother had taught him to make. It was like eating little clouds, if clouds tasted like honey.

Wobbyks like Tobble didn't perform theurgy. Only the six great governing species – humans, dairnes, felivets, natites, raptidons, and terramants – did. (Although I'd rarely seen dairnes practise it. We were too busy trying to survive.)

'We'll have hot tea in a jiffy,' Tobble announced.

'Thanks, Tobble,' I said. 'I'll tell Khara and Renzo.'

I joined the two of them near the meadow's edge, where they were staring out to sea. 'More razorgulls,' Renzo said, pointing.

We watched them swoop. 'They don't seem to be getting any closer,' I said.

'I've never seen birds move with such precision,' Khara said, brushing away a stray lock of wavy, dark hair teased by the wind. Her eyes were dark and thickly lashed, intelligent and wary. As was often the case, she was dressed in simple peasant clothes like a poacher, her former occupation, the colour just a shade lighter than her soft brown skin.

At times, Khara found it easier to pass as a boy on her journeys. Apparently, some humans have limited expectations when it comes to the abilities of females. I don't understand why. In the dairne world, females and males are treated equally.

Or perhaps I should say 'were.'

But then, there's much about human behaviour that I find baffling.

Hanging from Khara's side was a rusty blade. It was a most pathetic-looking weapon, but we'd all seen that blade in action and understood its hidden powers. That bent sword was the Light of Nedarra, a weapon with an illustrious history.

'How far do you think we can travel before dark?' Khara asked Renzo.

Khara was our leader, but for this part of the journey, Renzo was guiding us, since he was the only one who'd ventured into this mountainous part of Dreyland, one of two countries bordering Nedarra.

He glanced behind him at the looming cliffs. 'Hard to say. Terrain will just get more treacherous. And it looks like it may snow.'

'Let's stick to the plan as long as we can,' Khara said with a determined nod.

That plan, uncertain though it was, involved heading north and skirting the coastal mountains, in the hope of sighting a moving island called Tarok. We'd considered trying to search by boat, but we didn't have the resources to pay for even the humblest craft. And there were few available, in any case. This frigid time of year, even pirates kept their distance from the rocky coast of Dreyland. The tides were perilous, the ice floes unpredictable.

Why a sentient island like Tarok would head north,

we didn't know. But what we did know, what kept my heart alive on dark nights, was a legend about a colony of dairnes who'd once lived there.

I still recalled the poem about it, the one I'd had to learn as a young pup:

Sing, poet, of the Ancients who dared forth –
Brave dairnes, o'er mountains treacherous and cruel,
Who crossed the frigid waters of the north
To Dairneholme, living isle and floating jewel.

It had seemed impossible. And yet, after much travel and pain, I'd caught sight, just days ago, of what appeared to be a fellow dairne on the island, gliding from treetop to treetop.

At least, I *thought* I'd seen one.

My stomach whined again. 'Tobble says there'll be hot tea in—'

I stopped midsentence, silenced by the whirring sound of wings.

The razorgulls had changed course with startling symmetry, moving like angry bees heading for a target.

My heart tripped as my old, unwelcome friend – fear – returned.

We were the target.

CHAPTER 3

Attack from the Sky

'They're coming this way!' Renzo snapped, moving even as he spoke.

'Byx! Tobble! Flat on the ground!' Khara yelled, drawing her sword.

'Grab a torch instead,' Renzo said. He dashed for Tobble's little cooking fire and snatched up a burning log. 'They hate smoke.'

Khara sheathed her sword and took up a sizzling stick.

Tobble, sensibly, decided to lie down flat as ordered, but I wasn't willing to let Khara and Renzo do all my fighting for me, though I doubted I'd be much help.

I found an unburned branch and thrust one end into the flames. Grabbing fistfuls of damp grass, I threw them on the fire. Bitter-smelling grey smoke twirled skyward.

I waved my own feebly burning torch, coughing as the wind veered, and returned to stand with Khara and Renzo.

The birds were no longer a dark whirl. They were hundreds of missiles flying straight at us.

They hit us like a hailstorm, slamming into chests and

heads, striking with the cruel beaks that had given them their name. In seconds I was cut on both arms, narrowly avoiding a slashing attack that would have opened my neck. I heard Dog yelp in pain as a razorgull sliced through his fur.

My heart galloped in my chest. The gashes on my forearms burned, and I glanced down to see pearly blood oozing from the wounds.

'No!' I screamed, thrusting the torch upward, flailing blindly.

The birds were not giving up. The nearest razorgulls flew away, but swiftly turned to come back at me from behind. I spotted Khara, Renzo, and Tobble through a tornado of wings, yelling creative curses, arms windmilling to no effect.

As we bled and retreated, putting the smoking fire between us and the birds, they seemed to be everywhere at once, squawking and slashing. They concentrated their efforts on our bags and pouches – no doubt hoping for coins – but attacked any part of us they could reach.

'To the cliffs!' Khara yelled.

I understood her reasoning. We were being barraged from every direction. At least if we hugged the rock wall, the birds could only come at us from the front and sides.

I tapped Tobble on the back of his head and said, 'Come on, get behind us!' As if that would somehow keep him safe.

Already I was exhausted from swinging the torch, and

it had dulled to a mere flicker. When Khara's torch died completely, she tossed it aside to again draw her sword, but lost her balance and stumbled to the ground.

In an instant, she was completely concealed beneath a blanket of piercing beaks.

'Aaaahhhh!' Tobble screamed. He raced for Khara and leaped into the pile of birds, scratching, kicking, and yelling, 'Leave her alone! Leave her alone!'

Not for the first time, I witnessed the shocking sight of a wobbyk enraged. Enraged and fearless.

Renzo and I joined the fray, scattering enough of the crazed birds for Khara to shake herself free. She scooped Tobble up to ride on her shoulders, and the four of us, along with Dog, abandoned all dignity and scrambled for safety.

'Over here!'

Gambler! I couldn't see him through the feathered storm, but I heard his voice and pushed myself forward, trying to ignore my stinging cuts and the shrill and menacing squawks of the birds.

I hit a rock wall and twisted around to put my back against it.

'Follow my voice!' Gambler cried from somewhere to my right.

I edged along the cliff, batting uselessly at my attackers. My left foot caught on a sharp boulder and I landed hard on my back, the wind knocked from my lungs.

A massive paw reached out. Huge black claws hooked carefully around my scabbard and pulled me close.

'Thanks, Gambler!'

I scooted past him as he snatched birds in midair with felivet speed.

Khara pushed through, trying to join me. 'Renzo!' she cried, her voice hoarse.

'I see him,' Gambler said.

The great felivet ploughed straight into the bird cloud, slashing and batting with nearly supernatural speed and accuracy. He caught one unfortunate bird, which promptly disappeared down Gambler's gullet. Lunch. Razorgull blood streaked the side of his jaw and the birds swirled away as they considered this new threat.

Gambler found Renzo on his knees, still swinging his torch, blood streaming from a dozen cuts.

'Grab my neck!' Gambler yelled, and Renzo didn't need to be persuaded. Dragging Renzo along the ground, Gambler joined us.

In a flash, as quickly as we'd been besieged, we were free of the birds. I took quick stock of my surroundings. We'd backed into a narrow crack in the rock face: no place for creatures with wings. The opening was closed at the top, and the only light came from the opening onto the meadow. I could see razorgulls patrolling back and forth, waiting for us to return to battle.

'There's a cave,' Gambler said. 'Come.'

We followed, trailing blood on the stone floor, our only light the guttering flame of Renzo's dying torch.

At last we found a wide space with boulders where

we could rest. There we took turns bandaging each other's wounds, while Dog attempted, unhelpfully, to lick them.

'So,' Khara said as she wrapped a cut on Renzo's forearm, 'back to the birds, or on into darkness?'

'Darkness,' we all said at once.

'Well, that was easy,' Khara said. She took Renzo's flickering torch and we headed off into the cold and endless blackness.

CHAPTER 4

Good Little Doggie

Deeper and deeper into the cave we went. The torchlight faded to a weakly glowing ember and we stumbled at almost every step. Gambler's sight was far better at night, but even he could not see in absolute darkness. We tried to feed the flame, but the only fuel we could find was damp moss coating the walls and floor. The instant the torch died, we would be completely sightless, feeling our way far below the reach of the sun.

'I sense open space ahead,' Khara said. 'The air is different.'

'Yes,' Gambler agreed. 'But without light . . .'

I, too, could tell the air was growing less stuffy. I smelled something familiar yet strange: water. Not salt water. Not clear spring water. This water had a scent of strange minerals, of marsh and mushrooms.

The torch sputtered and died, plunging us into a black void. I held my hand an inch in front of my face and saw nothing. It was a strangely suffocating feeling, losing a sense so completely.

'I can see a little,' Gambler said. 'Byx, take hold of my tail. Everyone else join hands with each other.'

We crept forward hand in hand, or hand on tail, moving with all the speed of moonsnails. For two hours, maybe more, we were in a place without time. As we inched along, we complained about our bandages and pain, trying to distract ourselves from the crushing terror of being far underground without so much as a glimmer of light.

When we ran out of complaints, Tobble sang an old tune about giant mudworms, a great fear for wobbyks, who live in underground tunnels.

The chorus was gruesomely appropriate, and soon we were all singing along with him:

When wobbyks doze in slumber sweet,
The mudworm knows it's time to eat.
It dines on tails. It gnaws on paws.
(The mudworm doesn't care for claws.)

'Have you ever seen a giant mudworm, Tobble?' I asked.

'Once,' he answered. 'When I was just a kit.' He shuddered, and I felt his big ears tremble like leaves in a breeze. 'And believe me, once was plenty. They are giant and slimy and always hungry.'

Our voices were growing hoarse when Gambler suddenly stopped. 'It's lighter ahead!' he reported. 'There must be a way out!'

He was right about the light, wrong that it was sunlight. We soon realised that the walls of the cave were emitting

a faint golden light. After total darkness, it was welcome indeed.

Gradually our eyes adjusted and we could see well enough not to trip every second step. The feeling of openness grew, too. We rounded a bend in the tunnel and saw a circle of aqua light ahead. It seemed dazzling but was probably no brighter than the light of a crescent moon.

The tunnel ended a hundred feet or more above the floor of a great cavern. We gazed in awestruck astonishment at a scene that defied imagination.

The cavern wasn't big. It wasn't even huge. It was vast.

The entire Nedarran royal capital of Saguria would have fit comfortably in the immense space. Above us, an impossibly high ceiling bristled with rocky spears. The floor of the cavern had its own version: a forest of rock daggers pointing upward. The projections on the floor formed a ring at the edges of the most startling feature of the cavern, a lake with dark water so perfectly undisturbed it looked like polished black glass.

'I see fire,' Renzo said. 'All the way across the lake, to the right. Maybe several small fires.'

'And I smell them,' I said, testing the air.

We clambered down the steep descent, then set off on a strange and difficult march. The only way around the lake involved passing through clusters of oddly shaped stalagmites. Some looked like squat beehives. Some resembled a knight's spear, tapered and smooth. Others reminded me of huge candles, melted into grotesque forms.

But no matter their shape, all were capable of inflicting a cut or a bruise, and in our already bloody condition, it was tough going.

When we finally reached a narrow black sand beach, we collapsed in a heap.

'Should we look for kindling and try to build a fire?' Tobble asked, examining a bloody bandage on his left foot.

Khara shook her head. 'No. Not until we find out who or what started those fires across the lake.'

'Does anyone need fresh bandaging?' I asked.

We'd used up all our cloth strips and had nothing left to bind our wounds but some bitter-smelling lammint leaves I'd collected earlier. Lammint leaves are known to be medicinal, but between us we had so many shallow cuts from the birds, and so many scrapes and bruises from the stalagmites, that it was almost pointless. My whole body was a living bruise highlighted with a dozen stinging cuts.

I crushed up some lammint leaves and passed them to my friends, who pressed them to the new wounds they'd acquired in the cave.

'I'm really sorry,' I said.

'Sorry for what?' Renzo asked.

I pointed to the bandage on his arm. 'For that.' I waved my hand. 'For all of this. You wouldn't be hurt if it weren't for me.'

'Byx,' Renzo said, eyes locked on mine. 'That's a path you can't allow yourself to take. We're in this together. All of us.'

'Renzo's right. We're all committed to this mission. If there are dairnes still alive, Byx,' Khara said, 'we are going to find them.'

I nodded. But it was hard to shake the feeling of responsibility. Here we were, in the middle of nowhere, bleeding and bedraggled, just because I thought I'd seen another dairne. Because of one brief, heart-lurching sighting, my new pack of friends was willing to risk everything.

I'd grown used to difficult choices lately. But difficult choices were easier when your friends weren't involved. And the worst part? Even if we did find more dairnes, we weren't sure if we could ever safely return to our homeland. The Murdano wasn't exactly happy with us at the moment. Not happy, as in he'd be delighted to see us all dead.

He'd sent us on a mission to find more dairnes, hoping he could capture a few, then kill all the rest.

The Murdano had his reasons, vile though they were. Because dairnes can tell when someone is lying, we can be quite useful to those in power. On the other hand, too many dairnes could present a real threat to someone like the Murdano. The truth can be a dangerous thing. Especially if you're a liar.

It is, as my packelder, Dalyntor, used to say, our 'burdensome gift.'

We had, of course, decided not to fulfill his mission. And now, for all we knew, we were being chased by the evil despot's soldiers.

I sighed – louder than I'd meant to – and Dog padded

over, tongue dangling, tail wagging incessantly. His fur was streaked with blood, but he seemed as giddy as ever.

'He wants to be sure you're all right,' said Renzo, who, for some reason, believed Dog could do no wrong.

I managed a tolerant smile. I have mixed feelings about dogs.

I know it's wrong. My parents taught me to treat all species with respect. But just for the record, allow me to make this one thing clear: I am *not* a dog.

Unfortunately, I am regularly mistaken for one. Far too many strangers have stroked my head and cooed, 'Good little doggie.' (Clearly, humans are not the most observant mammals. It's perfectly obvious I'm not a doggie, good or otherwise.)

To begin with, dairnes have glissaires, fine membranes that allow us to glide, batlike, through the air. Not for long distances, alas. But floating high above the world, even for just a few seconds, is a joy no mere dog will ever experience.

We also have hands, complete with opposable thumbs. They are every bit as clever as human hands. And far superior to clumsy and unreliable paws.

Moreover, we can use human language skillfully – better than many humans, in fact. When a dog, on the other hand, wants to communicate with people, there are limited options. Basically it comes down to three choices: bark, beg, or bite.

Here's another advantage to being a dairne. Unlike dogs, we have pouches on our stomachs called 'patchels,'

convenient for carrying items. Once upon a time, I used mine to hold small treasures: a glistening sunstone, a ball for tossing with my packmates. These days, it held just a few things, including a map that might or might not hold my destiny in its pale scribblings.

But that's not all. Dairnes aren't just better designed than dogs. We behave better, too.

We don't go mad with glee at the glimpse of a zebra squirrel.

We don't roll on our backs in humiliating appeals for a stomach scratch.

We don't sniff impolitely at the backsides of passersby.

Dogs are, in a word, rude. And yet every village seems to be crawling with them, in all shapes and sizes. Some are as hulking as rockwolves, some not much bigger than well-fed mouselings.

So many dogs.

So few dairnes.

My father, may his heart shine like the sun, had another favourite saying: 'A dairne alone is not a dairne.'

He meant that for my species, the pack is everything. To be without them means ceasing to be who we are meant to be.

I used to groan at my father's sayings. All my siblings and I did. But I would give anything to hear him speak just one more time. Oh, to hear him say my name again!

But that will never be. I'll never see my pack again, or my family. In fact, though I cling to hope like a sputtering

torch in a dark cave, I know I may never see another dairne, no matter how far my friends and I travel. No matter how hard we search.

I watched as Dog licked my hand, depositing an unappetising layer of slobber in the process. 'You're a good little doggie,' I said, and his tail went into a frenzy.

I suppose they're not so bad, dogs.

And I need all the friends I can get.

CHAPTER 5

A Felivet's Fear

After far too brief a rest, Khara stood and stretched.

'Let's get moving,' she said, and with a bit of good-natured groaning, we soldiered on. Ten minutes later, the beach ended at a cliff face that extended all the way to the ceiling of the cavern, cutting us off.

My heart fell. There was no way forward.

'Uh-oh,' Tobble murmured.

I found myself entertaining terrible visions of the five of us wandering pitifully through stalagmite forests until we died of hunger.

'I'll take a look,' Renzo offered.

He waded into the water, inching alongside the wall of rock. He was waist deep when he turned to us and yelled, 'There's a submerged ledge. We might be able to follow it around to the far side.'

'Tobble,' Khara said, 'you can ride on my shoulders.' She kneeled down and Tobble hopped aboard.

'Come on, Byx,' Renzo urged. 'Time for a piggyback ride.'

I glanced at Gambler. He was pacing back and forth, staring intently at the water.

'What's the matter, Gambler?' I asked.

'Water, that's what's the matter,' he muttered. 'We felivets don't mind a stream or a puddle. And despite what people say, we can swim. But large bodies of water? You don't know what may be under the surface.'

'You're too big to carry,' Khara said in a gentle voice.

'I know!' I don't think I'd ever heard Gambler sound quite so irritated. 'I *know*. I know I have to do it.'

I frowned at Gambler in disbelief. 'Are you afraid?' I said.

The thought seemed preposterous, and I meant my question as a joke. To me, Gambler was the epitome of bravery. This was a felivet who had single-handedly attacked a fearsome Knight of the Fire and lived to tell the tale.

'Not afraid,' Gambler snapped. 'It's just . . . I don't like water.'

'I'll go first,' Khara said. 'If there's anything with an appetite for meat under the water, I'll just let them have Tobble.'

'Hey!' Tobble objected.

'I'm joking,' Khara said, winking at me.

But she wasn't joking about going first. 'It's freezing!' she complained as she stepped in. Cautiously Khara made her way, deeper and deeper, until she found the underwater ledge and eased along it. She kept one hand on the cliff face, the other held out for balance. With Tobble on her

shoulders, she looked like a human who'd grown a very strange second head.

Khara and Tobble moved out of sight as the cliff face curved, but after a few minutes she called, 'It's clear!'

'Hop up, Byx,' Renzo said, crouching a bit.

I shook my head. 'Thanks, but I'll ride on Gambler's back. I've done it before.'

I didn't want to imply that Gambler needed support. Felivets are the most solitary of species, and I knew he wasn't a creature who'd welcome assistance. But I wanted to help, if I could.

Renzo took the hint, nodded, and set off after Khara.

'Our turn, Gambler,' I said.

Gambler sent me a glare that once upon a time might have caused me to drop dead from sheer terror. But I knew I had nothing to fear.

I hopped atop his powerful back and said, 'Let's go.'

Gambler, of course, couldn't walk on the submerged ledge. He had to swim.

He swivelled his huge head and looked at me. Then he slipped into the water as silently as a hawk through clouds.

We moved effortlessly, it seemed. But having ridden on his back once before, I sensed his fear. His muscles were tensed, his breathing strained.

It made me wonder about Gambler. He was mighty, he was wise, he was the last creature you'd ever want to have to fight.

Was it possible that even he experienced fear the same way I did?

Finally, we climbed out of the water onto an area of wide shale stones. I jumped down so that Gambler could shake himself dry.

'Thanks for the ride, friend felivet.'

Gambler sneered and tried to look angry, but his pride was obvious. He'd done it. After a moment, he even gave me a slight nod of acknowledgment for my supporting role.

The others were waiting, soggy and shivering. 'That definitely looks like a village,' Renzo said, peering at two distinctly separate blazes.

'I think I see . . . I don't know, not humans, but something moving around the flames.' Khara sighed and shared a worried look with me. 'What do you think, Byx? It looks like the only two options are the way we came, or forward to whatever those creatures are.'

I was quite sure Gambler wouldn't be keen to swim back. And none of us wanted to risk the cliffs and the birds again – if we even found our way through the blackness.

'Let's see who they are,' I said, sounding more certain than I felt.

The shale was slippery, covered with patches of dark blue moss, but it was a walk in a meadow compared to much of what we'd dealt with.

We were perhaps a quarter league from the village when a shrill alarm assailed our ears.

Brrreeeeet! Brrreeeeet!

It was some kind of horn. Two alarming bleats, then nothing.

We looked at each other, waiting, not sure what to do. Before we could decide, the lake beside us erupted in froth.

A dozen or more creatures exploded from the water with such force that they flew through the air before settling into a line between us and the village.

I knew what they were. We all did.

'Natites!' I cried.