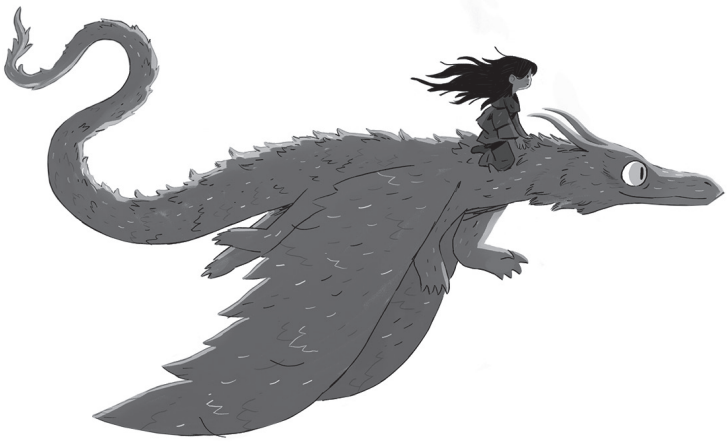
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DRAGON DAUGHTER

uclanpublishing

Dragon Daughter is a uclanpublishing book

First published in Great Britain in 2018 by David Fickling Books

This edition published in 2023 by
uclanpublishing
University of Central Lancashire
Preston, PR1 2HE, UK

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978-1-915235-64-0

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Set in 10/16pt Kingfisher by Becky Chilcott.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

For my children,
with love and admiration xxx



PART ONE



CHAPTER ONE

MILLA WAS HIDING IN AN ORANGE TREE ON the day the dragons returned to Arcosi. She was busy ignoring anyone who called for her, just as stubbornly as she ignored the twigs that were poking into her back or scratching her arms or tangling her curly black hair. She was small enough to be completely hidden by the dense green foliage, making it the ideal hiding place right there in the middle of it all, between the main building of the Yellow House and its kitchen block.

If she turned her head she could gaze down over the garden wall to the city rooftops below, and count the ships approaching the harbour. She breathed in the hot, busy smell of Arcosi, the city she loved: dusty stone, foul drains, rotting fish, salt, spice and blossom.

Being hidden brought Milla the first rest of the day. She felt the wobble in her legs and an airy, untethered feeling that told her she'd missed a meal. She reached out and picked a sun-warmed

orange, peeling it with her dirty nails and sucking the juice from the flesh till it ran down her chin, before throwing the evidence over the garden wall.

She began to feel better. She was sure no one meant to give her too much work. It was just that the moment anyone saw the youngest servant, they'd say, 'Milla! Job for you!' – not realising half a dozen others had already said the same thing. It was a point of honour never to say no, never to say she was too tired. She made herself useful. Indispensable. She would never find herself out on the streets like a stray cat. For in these strange days, when the duke's soldiers roamed the streets day and night, and rumour flew faster than a hawk sighting prey, the whole city felt like some great beast, waking hungry from a long sleep. At twelve years old, Milla already knew that everyone needed a place of safety. Somewhere to belong.

Just then, Milla heard voices approaching. For a change, they were not calling her name.

Two figures paused almost directly below her. She saw Lanys, the other servant girl, and a strange man wearing a dark blue, salt-stained cloak pulled low over his face. Lanys must have been covering the gate while the guards took a break by the well.

'Wait here, sir. I'll fetch the master, if you pass me the token?' That was Lanys, being careful. Everyone knew you didn't let any old traveller through your gates, not these days.

'Take it. Give it only to Nestan.' The stranger's deep voice shook slightly. And the accent? Milla couldn't place it; rare for her. It sounded rusty, unused to the long vowel sounds of Norlandish, the official language of the island of Arcosi.

'Please, be seated.' Lanys indicated the carved stone bench next to the fountain. 'I'll bring refreshments when I return.'

But the stranger didn't sit.

Milla nearly yelped when his hand brushed through the branches right next to her left foot. His hand was tanned deep brown, wrinkled as a peach stone, and holding an oddly shaped bag, something like a double pannier for a mule, only smaller. The man blindly hooked the bag round the same branch Milla was sitting on, but he kept checking behind him and didn't notice there was a girl roosting in his chosen hiding place.

She stared at the bag: there were four deep pockets of woven silk, two now hanging either side of the widest branch. They were roundish, as if they contained water jars. It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen and she was drawn to it like a moth to a candle flame. She prodded one carefully – firm and well-padded – and tried to guess what was inside. What needed hiding so urgently? Rubies? Poison? Firepowder? She pulled her hand away swiftly and checked the bag wasn't going to tumble down and blow her and the orange tree to ash and bone.

A new voice spoke below her, and she almost fell off her perch. Milla was known for her finely tuned hearing, but this person must have feather-feet to creep up so silently.

'Where is it?' the new voice hissed, so low and so menacing she could barely make out the words. 'Give it to me.'

Who was it? She peered through the dark green leaves.

A gloved hand pressed a knife against the cloaked man's throat.

'Now!' the newcomer said. He was dressed all in black, with a black-and-gold mask covering his face, as if he was on his way

to the evening's entertainment at the palace.

The first man didn't speak. He jabbed his attacker in the ribs with one elbow and tried to twist away. Milla caught fleeting sight of a strange tattoo inked on his inner wrist: a circle and something like a bird.

The masked stranger was quicker. His knife dug into the flesh of the man's neck. A thin trickle of blood ran down the blade.

Milla gathered herself, preparing to swing down feet first – with enough force, she could probably send them both flying – when she heard the master's voice in the distance, raised in anger, '. . . and my daughter knows very well that we're due at the palace after sunset . . .'

Her fingers gripped the branch so hard that her knuckles showed pale. She should move. Now. But no part of her body obeyed her.

'Sir, let me go and look for Lady Tarya, while you meet with—' Lanys's words came to an abrupt halt. She and Nestan must have reached the arched entrance to the courtyard.

Milla heard the whisper of steel as Nestan drew his sword. His war injuries might slow him a little, but Milla wouldn't want to bet against Nestan in a fight. She craned her neck, trying to see through the leaves.

The masked man spun round to face them, pulling the inert body of the other with him.

The first man managed to gasp against the blade: 'Never!'

It was his last word.

Afterwards, Milla was glad they'd turned from her.

She still saw the sudden spray of scarlet against a terracotta

pot. She heard the heavy slump as the body hit the floor. She saw a blur of black as the assassin fled.

Lanys screamed, piercingly loud, drawing guards from the kitchen yard.

'Catch him! A man in black, masked, with a knife!' Nestan bellowed the alarm and rushed down the stairs from the house. 'Quickly! He's getting away.'

Milla heard the clattering of boots as the household guards ran out of the gate in pursuit. She heard Nestan approaching, the metallic scrape as he sheathed his blade.

Milla had her eyes screwed shut. She clung to her branch, concentrating on just breathing and trying not to be sick. It needed all her attention. She'd seen plenty of dockside brawls, or city folk being dragged off by the duke's soldiers. But she'd never seen someone killed before. She could have stopped this. Why hadn't she acted when she'd had the chance? She'd hidden, like a mouse. Now a man was dead.

She opened her eyes and took a long, slow, shuddering breath.

'He knew,' Nestan said, half to himself.

Milla watched him through a gap in the leaves.

He was staring at the growing pool of crimson by his feet, turning a coin over and over between left fingers and thumb. 'He knew to send this coin, so I would come. Now we won't learn what message was worth dying for.'

'He – he – he knew the password,' Lanys stammered slowly. 'That's why – that's why I unlocked the gates.' She bent forwards, her auburn hair bright in the sunshine as she sank down on her knees, her hands flying up to her face like startled doves.

'I don't know how the masked man got through . . .' she whispered. 'I'm sorry.'

'Yes, that's the real mystery here. The assassin knew exactly when my guards would take their break today. *I wonder* . . .' Nestan's voice trailed off.

Milla was a loyal servant: she should tell the master what the stranger had hidden in the tree. Something worth killing for. Something worth dying for. But, for once, she was speechless. Her mouth felt dry and sour with shock, while her stomach turned over. She sat there, trembling and clinging to the branches.

One of the guards who'd given chase jogged back into the courtyard. 'Sir, we lost him. In that crowd: no chance.'

How clever the assassin was! Tonight was the duke's Fifty-Year Ball: the streets were full of the city's revellers in their finest clothes, all wearing masks. It would be impossible to find this man again, Milla realised.

Nestan's wondering came to an abrupt halt. He snapped his fingers to Lanys and the guardsman: 'Clear this up, before the twins see it. Double the watch on the gate.' He limped away, shouting, 'Where are my children, anyway? Isak? Has anyone seen the Lady Tarya?'

Lanys got up and stumbled after the master and they both vanished into the cool interior of the house. The guardsman bent and lifted the cloaked man's body under his arms, dragging him away and leaving a bright scarlet smear on the stone tiles.

How could the duke's ball be more important than a man's life snuffed out before their eyes? Milla felt dazed.

The strange pannier hung there, gleaming. It called to her,

like a sweet and tempting song. She touched the silk with one shaky finger. She wouldn't lift it down; not now, with the house in turmoil: Lanys would only snatch it from her immediately.

'I'm coming back for you later,' she said, and jumped down from the tree. Knees weak, she staggered, then caught herself, blinking the stars from her vision.

She took one long moment to look down at the blood, to stare straight at it and bear witness. This was real. This had happened. And she wondered who would mark this stranger's passing? As nausea rose again, Milla felt the narrowness of her life, her duties closing in on her like a snare.

She did the only thing it was in her power to do: 'I'm sorry. I'll look after your bag, I promise,' she whispered to the man's spilt blood.

Then she ran to warn the twins that they had to move fast.