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THE PIRATE'S DRAGON

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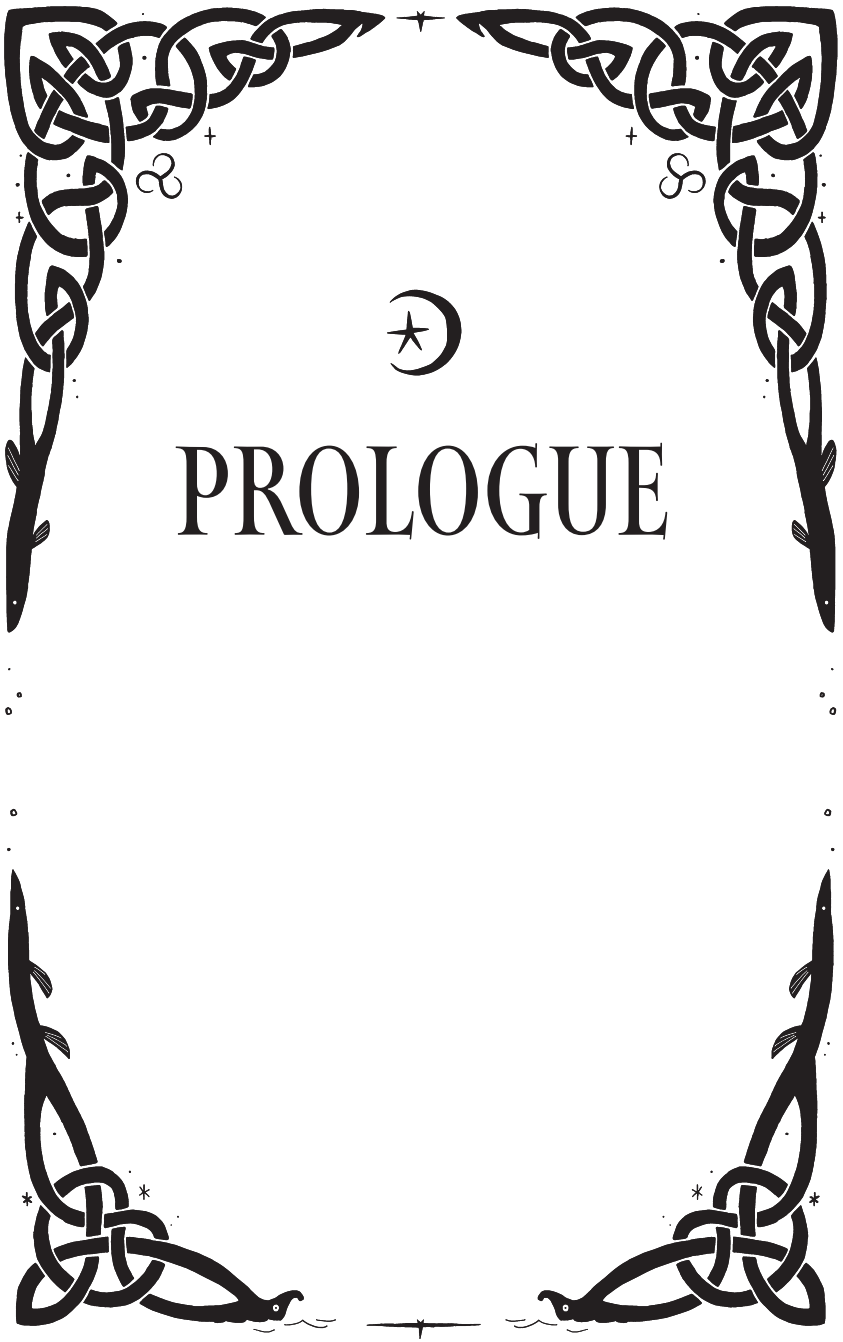
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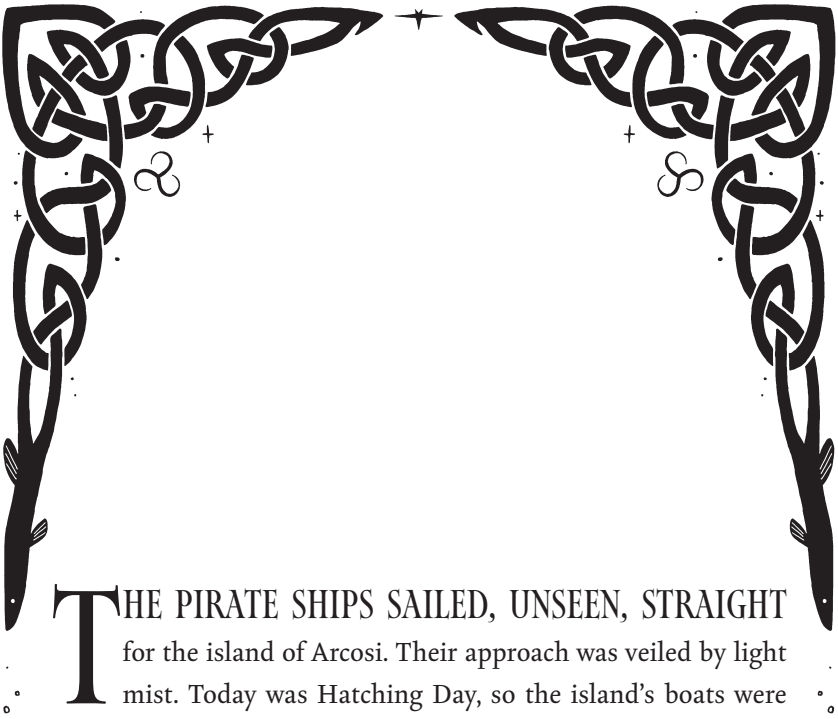
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For Hazel Holmes, who made this happen.
Thank you! xx



PROLOGUE



THE PIRATE SHIPS SAILED, UNSEEN, STRAIGHT for the island of Arcosi. Their approach was veiled by light mist. Today was Hatching Day, so the island's boats were all moored in the harbour, rocking gently at anchor. No one was going fishing on this day of celebration.

All the people of the island were gathering in the marketplace to see the newest clutch of dragons hatch and choose a child to bond with, out of all the Potentials. The streets of Arcosi were decked with streamers and flowers, the air scented with blossom and the delicious aromas of baking cakes and roasting fish. The whole island rang with music and laughter.

The pirate ships sailed closer . . . closer . . . closer. And there, flying low alongside them, came two dragons. One was as yellow as a spring daffodil. The other was perfectly black and covered in long-healed scars. This dragon caught sight of Arcosi, narrowed its eyes and hissed.



PART ONE

SERINA



CHAPTER ONE
HATCHING DAY

SERINA TIPTOED DOWN THE WIDE STAIRCASE just after sunrise. The palace was already busy – she could see people darting back and forth – but she'd perfected the art of staying hidden. She held all her excitement and hope close to her chest, like a precious and fragile treasure.

She padded into the grand dining room, her soft silk slippers making no sound on the thick carpets. The enormous table was set for just three. Isabella, the housekeeper, had chosen the finest plates in Serina's honour. Sunlight streamed in, making the silver gleam, dazzling bright. Fragrant steam rose from the coffee pot and the covered dishes smelt delicious. But there was no sign of the duke and duchess.

Serina's heart ached. Where were her parents? She stood there, completely alone, on the most important day of her life. They knew what this meant to her, and they weren't here. As usual.

Her shoulders drooped.

Then, in the next breath, she knew what to do. 'Isabella!' she called, spinning on her heel and taking charge.

'Your Grace?' Isabella appeared, with three younger kitchen staff following eagerly in her wake.

'My parents must have slept in the dragonhall.' It was their favourite place – and hers. 'They'll have lost all track of time, again. But we can't be late today.' Serina held her head high and issued a stream of loud, clear commands: 'Tell my Uncle Isak that my parents will be rushing, as usual. Please bring what they need for the ceremony out to the dragonhall. Now, I'll take the plates, if you can bring that, Isabella? And that . . .?' She pointed as she spoke. 'Everyone else, follow me!' She walked quickly through the double doors that led into the palace gardens.

As she marched towards the dragonhall where her parents' dragons roosted, she heard the newest kitchen help muttering, 'Why are we taking instructions from a twelve-year-old? She's not actually in charge, even if she thinks she is.'

Isabella's answer came quickly. 'It's fine. Let's just work together now: it's better that way.'

Serina didn't turn. She'd heard worse: *Bossy*. *Spoilt*. *Arrogant*. But just for a moment, she felt as if she carried a much heavier weight than these plates. She strode on. She wouldn't let her feelings show. She would be strong. Her parents were counting on her. The island of Arcosi was counting on her. She wouldn't let them down.

The original dragonhall of Arcosi lay at the centre of a horseshoe shape, the newer halls curving out from its hub. Its

wooden doors were open, and Serina glanced through. There they were! Her parents were sitting together in deep shadow, leaning on their dragons' flanks, talking so intently they didn't hear her come in.

Her father, Duke Vigo, looked tired. He had short black curls, threaded with silver, and a bristly beard to match. He wore green ceremonial robes today, matching his proud emerald dragon, Petra, one of the first four dragons to return to Arcosi when her parents were just children. Not much older than she was now, she realised with a jolt.

'Mum! Dad! We were going to be late, so we've brought breakfast out here,' she called out. 'Morning, Heral! Morning, Petra!'

The two huge dragons raised their heads and whiffled a *whooomph* of smoke in greeting. Serina put the plates down on the floor, headed straight for them and reached up to greet each enormous dragon tenderly.

Petra and Heral leant low and put their cheeks against hers, one on each side. They were astonishingly gentle, even though they were twice the size of the largest horse on Arcosi. Serina smiled and patted their faces, but they pulled away more quickly than usual, heading for the door and checking the skies.

'Are they all right?' she asked. 'They seem restless this morning.'

'Serina?' Her mother asked. 'What are you doing out here? It's Hatching Day!'

Serina resisted the urge to roll her eyes. '*I* know that. Do you?'

'It can't be that time already! Oh no, I'm so sorry, my love.' Serina's mother, Tarya, combined in one energetic person the

roles of Duchess and General of Arcosi. Despite her many talents, she had never been known for her timekeeping. 'We were going to have a special breakfast to celebrate your first Hatching Day! It was supposed to be a surprise,' she said, springing up and coming to embrace her only child. She wore red today, as usual, and her mass of curly golden hair was tamed in the traditional dragonrider plaits.

'It's fine.' Serina swallowed her disappointment and flung her arms around her mother's waist, tilting her head to rest on her shoulder. 'I heard Isabella and Jenna in the kitchen discussing the surprise – they're bringing it here now, look!'

Duke Vigo laughed and came over to join his wife and child in the hug. 'That's not the point of a surprise, my dear, but thank you for reminding us of the time.' Then he bent down a little to look straight into Serina's eyes. 'How are you feeling? Nervous? Excited? That must be why the dragons are behaving strangely – they're happy for you!'

'I'm mainly excited,' she replied, 'and a little nervous, I think.'

Feeling both parents' strong arms around her definitely made Serina feel better. After a long moment, she stepped back, watching as the housekeeper laid down a large tray containing a basket of hot bread rolls, a creamy cheese, a plate of almond pastries and a bowl of strawberries. 'Thanks, Isabella,' she mumbled.

Isabella – a silver-haired older woman who always welcomed Serina into the kitchen – gave her a big smile and turned to go, whispering, 'Good luck today, Princess!'

Serina had stopped explaining she wasn't actually a princess years ago, so she smiled and waved. 'Thank you!'

When the others had left, Serina's family settled themselves down to have a breakfast picnic right there on the dragonhall floor. Heral came to join them, managing to avoid all the dishes, but Petra stayed by the door as if keeping watch. Serina leant back on Heral's red scaly flank and ran her hands over it, checking its warmth without realising she did so. She'd grown up with these huge creatures and loved them with all her heart. But that didn't stop her from wishing for a dragon of her own.

Duchess Tarya poured herself a steaming mug of coffee and blew on it, frowning. 'I wish I could promise you it will be fine, that you'll definitely be chosen by one of Ruby's brood. But you know it doesn't work like that, don't you, sweetheart?'

'Mum,' Serina said indignantly. 'I've been going to Hatching Ceremonies since I was a baby. I've seen . . . how many?' She counted them off on her fingers. 'At least seven!'

The dragons didn't lay eggs every year – no one knew why – and always took it in turns to breed.

Serina took a long deep breath and said, 'I know I might not be chosen. I've prepared myself for that.' So why couldn't she stifle the hope that fluttered and hopped beneath her ribs?

Her father reached out and brushed away the thick black fringe that always got in her eyes. 'Be strong, whatever happens. I know you will be.'

Serina nodded, looking from her mother to her father and back again. She knew they'd been sleeping badly lately. She'd heard them talking about all their latest worries: her mother was in a fluster about this new Norlander trade delegation due next month, led by Tarya's cousin Torsten who she'd never even met. They were

both worried about the poor harvests – the reason Arcosi needed to trade more than ever. Her father was deeply concerned about sightings of strange dragons far off to the west of Arcosi. And there was a strange rumour about springwater wells running low. Serina couldn't add to their worries now.

Instead, she forced a smile and said, 'I'll do my best. Whatever happens today, I won't let you down.' She made herself eat a strawberry, but she couldn't manage anything more. Her whole body felt tight and strange.

From her position at the doorway, the green dragon looked over at Serina through piercing golden eyes. Petra blinked slowly, once, twice, and let out a deep rumbling growl that sounded almost like a warning.