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Written by

Lucinda Hare

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CHAPTER ONE

Betrayal

The battlegriff landed in a flurry of feathers, fighting the cruel bit that cut deeply into its delicate beak. As Darcy dismounted and carelessly threw the reins to a groom, the battlegriff bucked, lashing out at its tormentor. Grinning, Darcy struck back with his whip. Magic snapped, bringing the battlegriff to instant submission, singeing its feathers. Banned by his father from flying any hippogriff or dragon from the battleroosts, Darcy was now able to do as he pleased. Dragonsdome and all its dragons were his.

The young man glanced up to where a young Imperial was putting down on one of the higher landing pads anchored about Dragonsdome Keep. No such unruly behaviour marred the Lord Protector's flawless landing, but then dragon collars compelled obedience. Once outlawed by the Guild, the Lord Hugo Mandrake, Lord Protector of the Seven Sea Kingdoms had overturned that law and many others, reducing dragons, even mighty Imperial Blacks, to mere beasts of burden subject to the Kingdom's needs.

They had been planning the royal procession that would celebrate the Lord Protector's wedding to Queen Caitlin in the new Year of the Lesser-Spotted Burrowing Cat, when a courier had arrived at the Sorcerers Guild requesting the young Earl's immediate return home. Alert and suspicious, the Lord Protector had returned to Dragonsdome with Darcy.

Striding to the Great Hall, Darcy threw off his heavy cloak and accepted the welcome of his steward and constable.

'So,' Darcy sprawled carelessly on his father's high chair. 'What important news could you possibly bear that you could not entrust to one of my men? That I am summoned from Court?'

Felix DeLancy, newly minted Dragon Master, hesitated, licking his lips nervously.

'My Lord, this news is for your ears only.'

'Clear the hall,' Darcy dismissed everyone. Unnervingly, the Lord Protector remained motionless in his richly adorned robes, eyes fixed upon the Dragon Master. Felix could not say why, but this powerful sorcerer, who ruled both the Guild and the Court, made him afraid in a way the arrogant young Earl did not.

'Well? Speak up!'

'A raven arrived at dawn, my Lord, from Bearhugger's esquire.'

Darcy glanced at the Lord Protector.

‘I do not trust the SDS. Let the boy escape to Dragon Isle,’ the Lord Protector had suggested to the young Earl. ‘But first bring him to me.’ Darcy had not asked why. His mentor did not welcome questions. If he wanted Darcy to know, he would have told him why.

‘And?’ Darcy stifled a yawn. He had been out into the early hours of the morning with his friends, Darcy’s Devils, and had a headache.

‘They believe they have found the Earl’s battledragon. I thought you would want to hear immediately.’

That brought Darcy out of his seat.

‘They have found the Earl’s battledragon?’ The Lord Protector’s voice was soft, flat with menace. ‘Is it so? What makes you think that?’

Felix swallowed, mouth suddenly dry. Head down, he held up the small scroll with the broken wax seal.

‘They returned it to Dragon Isle two moons ago,’ Felix glanced up at Darcy. ‘From your mine at Cairnmore, My Lord Earl...although it was badly injured. I don’t know how they did it. The battledragon…’ Felix paused, lest he sound soft in the head. ‘The battledragon…’ he took a deep breath and plunged on in a rush, words tumbling breathless from his tongue. ‘They say that the Earl survived the battle also…’

‘What?’ Darcy rounded on the Lord Protector. ‘But you said th-’

Silence!

The force of the Lord Protector’s anger slammed Darcy back down onto the chair. Be warned…not one word…

‘Tell me,’ he commanded Felix.

Felix swallowed. Had he really seen the Lord Protector’s eyes flare green? A trick of the light, surely?

‘They say,’ he licked his dry lips, aware of how ridiculous this sounded. ‘They say the Lady Quenelda can talk to dragons. Her…esquire, that commoner…Root Oakley, says the dragon told her of the battle, that she can bond with the creature…’

So the rumours that the Earl’s daughter had recovered from her mysterious condition were true, despite the SDS Commander’s regretful denials. The Lord Protector’s heart thumped. Why do they conceal this news from me? Do the Queen and her Constable also know?

Darcy snorted derisively. ‘Talk to dragons? She has a talent with the brutes, that is all.’ Not even he could deny that, after watching Quenelda fly to the aid of their father in the Cauldron at the Winter Jousts. But the Lord Protector did not laugh.

‘Continue,’ he commanded.

‘They believe that the Earl was found badly injured, that he was taken in by one of the Clans who spirited him to safety. They – Bearhugger, the Lady Quenelda and her esquire – are going to search for him. Along with Bearhugger’s esquire. They fly to the Howling Glen any day now. They-’

The Lord Protector’s eyes narrowed, his handsome face suddenly stilled. Felix felt a sudden pressure in his head. Which clans? A cold voice demanded, making him shiver. Which clans have hidden him?

‘My Lord Protector,’ Felix swallowed, the command had not been spoken, he was sure of it. ‘The message did not say.’

The Lord Protector’s eyes narrowed. Felix squirmed, but then the cold interest diminished and was gone, leaving him shaking.

Darcy dismissed Felix with a careless wave of the hand, watching as his Dragon Master made his way unsteadily across the hall.

‘Do,’ the young Earl swallowed, face pale even in warm glow of candlelight. ‘Do you think he could truly have survived?’

‘If the Earl is alive, then why has he not returned? Nonetheless, it would be foolish to ignore them entirely.’ How could a child speak to dragons? They must wonder how the Earl’s battledragon came to the mine.

‘Perhaps,’ the Lord Protector mused, ‘Bearhugger can find a trail that no one else has. If your father is alive, let them lead us to him, and we will kill them all; a chance to be rid of your troublesome sister.’

Why did the girl fill him with disquiet? She was mocked at Court, hopeless at lessons...and yet...she was a threat...somehow...he felt sure of it.

Darcy felt a momentary twinge of compassion, but it passed. If his father were alive that would mean he himself was no longer Earl, and he was enjoying his new found wealth and power too much to relinquish it. As for his step-sister, she had shamed him twice. There would not be a third time.

‘What will you do?’

‘Well,’ the Lord Hugo Mandrake contemplated the young Earl. Soon he would reveal the boy’s true parentage, and bind Darcy to him forever, but one step at a time. ‘We must ensure that they get all the help that they deserve on their dangerous quest, must we not? I will set my dragon master Knuckle Quarnack and his men on their trail to see where it leads. Bearhugger’s young esquire will betray them to us.’ And I will bring the hobgoblins inland to the Howling Glen and the Old Wall, ready to strike if needs be....

He smiled wolfishly, his handsome face alive with anticipation. ‘The north is such a very dangerous place after all; especially for an injured dragon, a young girl and her esquire. It will take more than even Tangnost Bearhugger to bring them home alive.’

CHAPTER TWO

Dragon Quest

Wooooooooooooo. Wooooooo.

The sound of a deep dragon horn echoed round the flight cavern in the depths of Dragon Isle. Lights dimmed, so that the landing lights encircling the thirty dragon pads flared into sudden brightness, illuminating the Imperial Blacks rising from the hidden hanger decks and armour pits below. With a grinding of cogs and gears, and a vibrating metallic boom, the hangers docked with the dragon pad flight decks. Deck crew swarmed about the huge battledragons, as Bonecracker commandos and Sea Reaver marines from the III First Born Regiment prepared to board. Operation Knight Watch, to relieve the isolated garrison of the Howling Glen, was underway.

At the centre of this vast flight hanger cavern was the SDS Commander's dragonpad, but Commander Jakart DeBessart was not leading this battlegroup north. His task was to remain on Dragon Isle, commanding all his remaining regiments and protecting the Queen and Court. Nonetheless, on his dragonpad, wings still folded, knelt a fully-prepped Imperial Black.

This battledragon was huge; a young stallion that should still be in his prime; instead, every bone in his emaciated body stood out, and slight differences in colouration betrayed a latticework of terrible wounds and puckered scars, some newly healed. The Imperial slowly stretched his great wings till the tips rested on the metal decking, revealing a right hind leg that had been badly broken and badly set, a weakness he would carry for the rest of its life. Unusually, this Imperial also wore dragon armour, a petrel and underbelly armour crafted with spells as well as hammers. Cast in mottled shades of black, the segmented armour was bound about with wards of concealment and illusion. The SDS Comm-ander, a skilled Arch Battlemage, had cast them himself; because this Imperial was not able to cloak, was not able to conjure a cloak of invisibility that gave the name to the Stealth Dragon Services, the SDS.

Normally such dreadful injuries would invalide a battledragon out of service, but this was no ordinary battledragon. This was Stormcracker Thundercloud III, battledragon to the Earl Rufus DeWinter, one-time Commander of the SDS and Queen's Champion, now missing in action since the Battle of the Westering Isles. Rescued from a brimstone mine and healed with his daughter's help, he was leaving Dragon Isle to hunt for the missing Earl.

Unique though this SDS battledragon was, his flight crew were even stranger. No black armoured Dragon Lords with their fiercesome dragon helmets sat in the pilot and navigator's seats. Instead a skinny pale-faced girl sat in the pilot's seat, dwarfed by the spelled witchwood that towered above and about her. Her blond hair was cut ragged and tousled so that it radiated out like a dandelion, and her tawny eyes looked anxious.

Tentatively, Quenelda DeWinter stretched out her hand to the handprint inlaid in the right arm, but her touch did not awaken the runes and sigils of power that ran through the witchwood. Only her

father's touch could achieve that. The witchwood felt cold and unyielding, even through the yellow scale on her left palm.

'It's nearly time.' Tangnost, SDS Dragon Master and veteran Bonecracker, was beside her, dark eye studying her far away expression. 'Ready?' His strong hand clasped her shoulder.

Quenelda nodded, unable to speak. He and Dragonsdome's esquires, Root and Quester, were risking their lives because of a dream, because they believed she was a Dragon Whisperer. What if she were wrong? What-

'Steady, lass,' it was as if the dwarf could read her mind. 'Everyone is afraid before a mission. It's no bad thing; it's what keeps you alive.' He turned and bellowed at the two youths down on the dragon pad flight deck sorting through equipment. 'Mount up, Root, and stow the equipment. Quester. Pre-flight check.'

'Sir! Yes, Sir!'

Root Oakley hefted the last storage pack on his back and climbed up the dragon's tail and up to where waxed black canvas stretched between the giant dragon's spinal plates, to where nets of hay and thistles hung from hooks. Having stowed the last baggage next to the cauldrons of brimstone, he turned and called. 'Two G-'

There was a thundering on the overhead gantry and then a ball of golden red flew through the air bowling him over, slamming him to the deck.

'Two Gulps!' the young gnome protested as he lay winded, trying to wipe the copious slobber from his face. 'Whoa! Get-get off! You're squ-squashing me!' The juvenile sabretooth dragon's huge taloned toes had him firmly pinned to the ground.

'Stop stop!' He could hear the deck crew chuckling as he was neatly rolled over, trussed like a fly in a spider's web. There was a loud tear, and Two Gulps was happily chomping away at Root's cloak, his tongue searching out the pockets where the honey tablets were hidden. In moments cloak and tablets had gone. Burping contentedly, Two Gulps now allowed himself to be led into the roost, where Root firmly tied him up before seeking out his friends.

'Behave,' Root admonished, trying to sound like he was still in charge.

He was still amazed at the time it took him to walk from the tail to where Quenelda already sat on the pilot's seat astride the dragon's shoulders. Standing by his navigator's seat, he took one last look about him at the place that had been home in recent moons. It was barely dawn, but it seemed as if all of Dragon Isle had gathered on the gantries and ledges that ran about the cavern's walls to bid them farewell, the dark armour and garb of soldiers and Mages contrasting with the bright robes of the academics from the Battle Academy high on the cliffs of the island. But would they succeed? Would the Seven Kingdoms ever see the Dragon Lords rising again?

‘Come on, lad,’ Tangnost led Quester beneath the batteldragon. ‘Final inspection. Pilot always checks the dragon is fit to fly before he mounts, but Quenelda has enough to deal with, so it’s down to you and me.

‘Right, let’s see how much you’ve learnt.’

Quester took a deep breath. Taking hold of the neck girth rungs, he checked the great buckles that held pilot and navigator’s seats; they were moulded to fit each individual dragon and were held by spells, but leather and brass still strapped them down. The young esquire made sure he did not touch the rune embedded in the wood that could eject the seat if the dragon crashed, a modification introduced after the Battle of the Westering Isles when dragon fought dragon for the first time since the ancient Mage Wars.

Scrambling down, he jumped lightly on to the battledragon’s shoulder and gave him a signal by tapping a leg.

‘I never imagined that an Imperial’s muzzle was so soft,’ Quester said, as Stormcracker turned his great head and bent it, so that gusts of warm air enveloped the pair in greeting. The youth examined the heavy silver bit and bridle to make sure they rested comfortably in that huge maw that dealt death to so many hobgoblins.

Climbing up from the flight deck, the esquire stepped out to examine Stormcracker’s spread wings, while Tangnost checked their underside, calloused hands running over the raised scar tissue that had hardened like aged bark.

But who knew what hurts lay hidden within? The Dragon Master thought. Although they roosted in coombs, Imperials were creatures of the air. To be confined in the depths of a mine for so many moons, wounded, alone…who knew what damage that had done to the Earl’s dragon? As it was, the Imperial’s dragon magic was diminished by his severe injuries, and the Lord Protector’s dark touch; and he was no longer able to cloak and hide them from prying eyes. That placed them in great danger should they ever be discovered. The Dragon Master glanced upwards to where Quenelda was. How much would the Earl’s daughter be able to help them?

That Quenelda had power far beyond her twelve winters no one doubted. Not after the mayhem at the Cauldron; and Root had seen her sorcery unveiled when they had rescued Stormcracker from the mine, when she had prevented the exhausted dragon’s headlong fall to certain death. But that power was erratic, dangerous to those around her: and no one, least of all the Earl’s daughter, understood her true abilities.

But although she had tried and tried, always the Earl’s daughter shook her head with frustration when Tangnost asked how lessons were going. On the verge of tears, she was becoming irritable, so that he no longer asked, and hid his anxiety. If she could even combine her power with that of Stormcracker to cloak, they could elude the Lord Protector’s spies and minions, and their quest stood a chance. If not....

‘Sir?’ Quester was looking at him curiously. ‘Sir, is everything alright?’

Tangnost cursed inwardly. He had to hide his worries.

‘You’ve missed something lad...’ he found a smile. To be fair, Stormcracker’s harness and tack were modified for winter campaigning, and were yet to be standard issue. But they were heading far to the north of the Howling Glen as winter closed in, and Imperials suffered badly in the cold.

Standing on the dragon’s claws Quester pursed his lips, mentally counting off his checks. He frowned as Tangnost pointed down.

‘Oh!’ Quester gritted his teeth. He was actually standing on the huge padded sheaths that protected the dragon’s claws! ‘I knew there was something I’d missed.’

Tangnost nodded. ‘But well done, lad.’ He frowned as Quester turned to examine the metal for corrosion or cracks. Although the boy had clearly been affected by his time at Dragonsdome with the young Earl Darcy, he was reluctant to talk about it. But the apothecary had quietly drawn Tangnost aside to tell him that Quester was suffering frequent headaches, although there was no sign of a head injury.

But Quester smiled as he bent to his task, the dragon master’s approval calming him. For some reason he was anxious, as if he had an important task that he couldn’t quite remember. He was tired, that was all. He had been training hard with bow and arrow as well as sword, at Tangnost’s insistence: ‘A sword won’t help you in the air, lad, unless we’re boarded.’

‘T-5 and counting...’

They finished their inspection swiftly. Tangnost knew that the armourers, dragon smiths and roost hands had already done their job, but it was tradition that pilots checked their own mounts and armour before takeoff.

Alone of those venturing out in search for the missing Earl, Tangnost had experience of war and the wider world beyond the Sorcerers Glen. A Bonecracker veteran of sixty five years and over a hundred battles, he had also flown with the Earl on Stormcracker as the Earl’s Shield, and knew the battledragon as well as Quenelda did. Success or failure of their quest would rest on his broad shoulders.

Tangnost had sent word to his blood kin amongst the clans of the north west; the White Raven, Red Squirrel, Capercaillie, the Narwhale and Ice Bear, and a dozen others. Following Quenelda and Root’s successful mission to the Cairnmore brimstone mine, the Wild Cats at this very moment were guarding a precious caravan of brimstone wending its slow way overland to Dragon Isle.

If they were to find the Earl, they needed help from those still loyal to the Queen and the SDS, for rumours had reached Dragon Isle that the clans were divided, that the Dragon Lords had met with hostility when they put down for brimstone, supplies, and to recruit. There were as yet unconfirmed rumours that a small battlegroup from the IV Fire Storm regiment had disappeared somewhere in the Inner Isles.

The world had gone mad, and he was venturing out into the unknown with a wounded dragon, a girl, a boy, and an untested esquire. Tangnost shook his head. He must be mad too!