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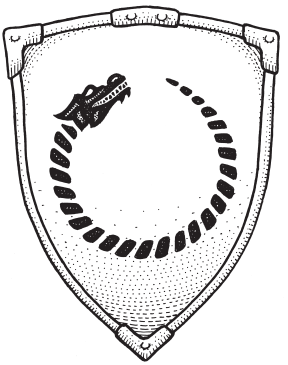
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Chapter 1

THE stench of dragon was overwhelming. A burning ache at the back of Rick's throat, a stinging in his eyes—there was nothing else in Avalon that smelled quite like it.

Pausing before the entrance to the den, Rick Halfdane, the Fey King's newest dragon keeper, took a last breath of fresh air. The other keepers, a scarred and scratched collection of Dark Folk, stood in a semicircle behind him, watching, their amusement plain. All the dragon keepers were little better than outcasts in Avalon; it pleased them to have a human added to their number, a new underdog to bully. Money was changing hands as they took bets on his survival. His death wasn't in doubt—just how long it would take the dragon to kill him.

The sun had just edged over the horizon, flooding the rock ledge outside the dragon stables with blood-red light but no warmth. The long shadows cast by the towers of the royal castle sprawled across the cliff face, stamping King Oberon's authority on the landscape. The northerly breeze from the distant range of ice-capped mountains was cold and dry. White eagles circled above the turrets. Rick tried to make this little moment last: it might be his final glimpse of daylight.

'Go on then, changeling,' urged Gorth, the veteran keeper, uncurling his iron-tipped whip. A tough part-troll Fey, with a gnarled hide and tusks instead of teeth, Gorth had rated the human's chances as very low. 'Sun's up and the king's mount will be really hungry. Waiting will only make it worse.' He spat a hissing droplet of venom on the ground at Rick's feet, his forked tongue flickering. 'And to think I forgot to feed it yesterday; it'll be starving.'

The other keepers laughed. A couple changed their bets to shorter survival times.

He'd been set up. No point risking the only one he loved that he still had with him. He tapped the golden torc around his neck. 'Aethel, stay here.'

Obediently, his magical snake shimmered from ornament into life and slid to safety in a crack just over the rough lintel.

Deep inside the honeycomb of caves, the beast was already roaring as it sensed the arrival of food. Penned in by the rock, the dragon's claws scraped on the floor and walls, hollowing out a few more inches in the chambers it had already carved in its years of captivity. The noise made Rick's teeth ache, hitting the note that went right to the nerve.

Was there nothing about dragon keeping that wasn't the complete pits for a human? It was the all-out winner of the worst job in history, right down there with sewer cleaner.

Casting a last defiant look at his audience of ill-wishers, Rick entered the tunnel and reached for the protective breastplate that hung just inside. A little large for him, it had been made for the previous keeper who had been invalided out after serving this particular dragon for only a week. Next, Rick laced up his shin pads and gauntlets, and finally added a helmet to cover his hair. The gear would not be much help in the event of the dragon turning on a keeper, but it did give Rick the illusion of protection. He breathed through the shivery sensation that rolled inside him. He couldn't think too much or he would never find the courage to face the dragon.

'OK, if I get out alive, I'll get hold of a massive plate of chips somehow and eat every single one.' He had become fond of this human treat during

his recent stay on Earth. Fey cooks hadn't yet discovered French fries so he had no idea how he was going to realize his dream. Still, it felt better to hope than despair. 'So, all I have to do is not become a dragon chip first.'

Uniform securely fastened, Rick grabbed a torch and proceeded to the meat dump. No one but the keeper was expected to come this close to the dragon; magical defences were useless as the creature just ripped straight through them. Brute force and bribery were the only things that worked. The Fey hunters dropped their catch down a specially constructed shoot in the rock. It was Rick's task to drag the carcass the last hundred yards; this was to remind the dragon that it relied on the keepers for every meal.

Thrusting his torch in to the dark recess at the bottom of the shoot, Rick cursed when he saw that the only offering was a half-eaten chicken. Rick hooked it off the floor and slung it over his shoulder. He should have expected this. The chance of surviving to eat his chips had just got a whole lot fainter.

'I hate this place,' Rick muttered, words inadequate to describe the deep loathing he felt for his life in Avalon. Painfully lonely, without anyone but Aethel to look out for him, Rick just wished he could be a normal teenager living in an ordinary

family on Earth, ignorant that places such as this existed.

He turned the final corner to look down on the den in which the dragon, one of the warrior Stormridge breed, was stabled. The top of the pit was covered with thick fire-proof bars and long spikes pointing downwards so the dragon could not grip on to them and saw through the steel. That left the creature the floor and walls of its cell on which to vent its frustration. Whitish-grey rubble was heaped in one corner, torn up by claws. The air was thick with dust. As a chameleon species, dragons could change colour to suit their environment, but as all of them were kept in dungeons they had lost their rainbow skins. They had become dull, ugly and vengeful.

Rick peered in to every corner of the prison. Then he spotted his dragon clinging to the far wall, ragged wings flat against its back, tail tucked in to the new gouge it had made in its frenzy. It was enormous—the length of a tennis court, though a good deal narrower, with its pinions tucked tightly to its body. Skin pitted and uneven like a dried lava flow, claws sharp as scythes, this old dragon looked hideous and mean, and as though it would enjoy nothing better than to use its keeper's bones as toothpicks. It wasn't hard to see the parallels between Rick's and the dragon's status as Oberon's

captives. The dragon hated life in Avalon as much as he did. Maybe more.

'Breakfast is served!' Rick called, throwing the chicken through the bars. It plummeted unimpressively to the ground a few feet from the dragon's tail. The other keepers had already told him he was wasting his time talking to their charges. It wasn't that the dragons didn't have the wit to understand—before Oberon took over, they had once ruled Avalon in their own right and were famed for their intelligence—it was that they just didn't care what any usurping Dark Folk had to say. 'Sorry it isn't much. The next thing I'm going to do is hunt down the hunters and make sure you get a decent meal. Double, to make up for today.'

The Stormridge did not move.

'We didn't get a chance to be introduced yesterday,' Rick continued, tone more cheerful than he felt. He was now supposed to lift the hatch in the bars, rope down, and enter the cave to muck out the creature's pen—the idea being that occupied with its meal it would not attack. Some hope. He eyed the pitchfork, wondering if he could use it to defend himself at a pinch.

If only he could do this by magic: use a couple of lifting spells to move the dung and zap the floor with a spring charm to wash the dirt away. But the problem was that dragons dampened magic.

Something about their own power meant no charms worked within a few feet of them.

Rick balanced his way across the bars to drop the rope into the pit. The pitchfork went next, landing prongs downwards, quivering slightly. He then opened the grill.

The dragon still made no movement.

'I'm coming down to clear up,' he continued, in what he hoped was a soothing tone. 'To make you more comfortable.'

A curl of smoke wound from the creature's nostrils. A sign of annoyance? Malice?

'OK, coming in.' Rick grasped the rope and quickly slid down. He could feel the unblinking stare of the dragon following his progress. He wanted to hunch his head closer to his shoulders to defend the back of his neck, but decided against showing weakness. He smoothly picked up the pitchfork and made his way over to the straw-covered area the dragon had selected for its bathroom, pretending that everything was perfectly normal and he didn't have a one-tonne dragon fixing him with a predatory gaze. *Don't shake,* he urged himself, noticing his legs were in danger of going into a little jittery dance all on their own. He approached the dung pile. During his induction he had learned that dragons were fastidious creatures and objected to living in a dirty stable. 'I'll just get rid of this for you.'

That did it. The Stormridge cannoned the short distance between them, its tail whipping the pitchfork from Rick's hands. Just in time, Rick dived behind the heap of rubble, narrowly missing being crispy fried by a blast of flame. Straw blackened and whirled up in sparks, a flock of tiny firebirds. He felt a scorching heat on his face. Hair smouldered. Then nothing.

Cautiously, Rick raised his head from behind his barrier. The dragon had reverted to wall painting mode, this time on the other side of its cell. The chicken, straw and dung had all gone up in smoke. All that was left was the smoking stump of his pitchfork.

Spooked, Rick didn't even bother to retrieve it. He made straight for his lifeline and hauled himself out of the pit, heartbeat thumping in his ears. Once safely above the bars he slumped against the wall. OK, OK, he was alive. The dragon hadn't killed him. It could have done, so very easily. Something he had said must have set it off—probably the idea that he did the cleaning up on its behalf. It was a prisoner, for troll's sake. He'd be annoyed if his jailer more or less told him to be grateful for mucking out his cell.

Rick peered down at the dragon again. Alien black eyes glared up at him.

Gingerly, Rick reached for a bucket and splashed water over the ashes. Grey liquid trickled out of the

channel carved in the floor. The dragon made no objection so Rick quickly threw down two more pails of water. That left a smelly damp corner. Just as he was wondering what to do about that, the dragon breathed out a ripple of heat, drying up the remaining puddles.

'Clever!' Rick called before he remembered the dragon hated his guts. 'Um, I'll just get the straw.'

In silence, he scattered the straw through the bars. The dragon watched.

'Well, er, that's it for now. I'm going to go and complain about the food delivery but I think they did it on purpose—they want you to kill me.' Hobspit, he probably shouldn't put ideas in the creature's mind.

I know, human. That is the only reason you live.

The dragon's thought burst in to Rick's brain. Rick clutched his ringing temples. He'd heard that dragons used thought-speech, but no one had ever reported experiencing it. The sensation was like a claw raking across tender flesh.

'Troll breath—that hurts.'

Poor little lost human, snarled the dragon, not the slightest bit repentant, though its voice was less painful this time, as if it had adjusted its power. *I can bear hunger for one day only. Tomorrow I will eat you.*

Rick shuddered. 'I'll talk to the hunters.'

You do that, changeling. But, in any case, your time is up. The dragon's tongue flickered out to lick its mouth.

'I said I was sorry about the food. Really I am. Not my fault, but I'll try and sort it out.'

This is not about food. Dragons hear things. Either I eat you or Oberon kills you. At least I will make it quick.

'Oh wow, that's very public spirited of you,' Rick replied with more attitude than he intended. Stupid to sneer at a dragon when you were still in firing range. He hurriedly turned to go.

Perhaps you would do well to listen, changeling. Oberon has plans for your scrawny hide.

'What do you mean?' Rick came back and crouched over the bars but the dragon had closed its eyes and ignored him. He sighed and tugged off his helmet and gauntlets to sit for a moment with his back against the tunnel wall where he was out of direct fire but still within hearing. 'I guess you've been more than fair telling me that much.'

Sometimes it was very hard to stop from sinking into despair and find that part of him that could carry on fighting. Ever since he had learned a few days ago that the Fey had not swapped but stolen him from his parents, Rick had felt a great aching hole in his chest, a longing for another life. And every time he dared hope for something better, his own circumstances took a turn for the worse. He

was under the thumb of a vicious cruel-hearted king, the tyrant Oberon; he had had his chance of escape only for a brief second before it was whisked away, like a meal placed in front of a starving man then fed to others.

He hugged his knee, the other leg sprawled across the passageway.

Human changelings like him, trapped in Avalon at Dark Lore training camp, were doomed to a life of slavery unless they saved themselves. The Fey Folk thought them only fit to be used and discarded like rubbish. For one brief moment, he and his friends had had hope—a plan to set up a new Round Table. When knights were invited by King Arthur to join his table they gained amazing magical powers that helped them to fight their Fey enemies on an equal footing—spell for spell. Rick had hoped to start a new generation of Round Table knights able to defeat Oberon, but he needed the original table founders, Arthur and Merlin, to do it. But before Rick could make his move, Morgan, the commander of the camp, had booted him out for spreading rebellion and sent him to be a dragon keeper. Now he could only return to the vital task of recruiting Arthur if he survived the dragon's dungeon and escaped from Oberon's well-guarded palace. For Rick, it was out of the frying pan and into the furnace blast of dragon flame.

II

Rick rubbed the empty place on his wrist where Aethel normally sat. He missed his mates: Roxy, still stuck at Dark Lore half a day's journey to the south; Tiago, their half-human half-Mage ally; and Linette, the human friend they had made on Earth. Now it looked like their plan to re-form the Table had failed as he was pretty much doomed to working with the dragons. The worst thing was that, after finding such good friends and working as a team, he was again alone. He wanted Roxy's cheek and undefeated spirit, Tiago's oddball way of looking at the world, Linette's wry humour and, well, normality—she was the only one with anything resembling a family life.

Get moving, human, or I will blast you now.

Rick sprang to his feet. Low though he might be, he wasn't quite ready to be dragon-kill. As he ran back down the tunnel to the entrance, he could have sworn he heard a wheeze of laughter echo in the den.