

THE LYGONS OF FRAITH

LYGON

AN INTRODUCTION

ISLAND



ARLO MERCIA

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AN INTRODUCTION

By Arlo Mercia

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PDF Edition

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For more information about Arlo Mercia and the inhabitants of Fraith go to:
www.arlomercia.com



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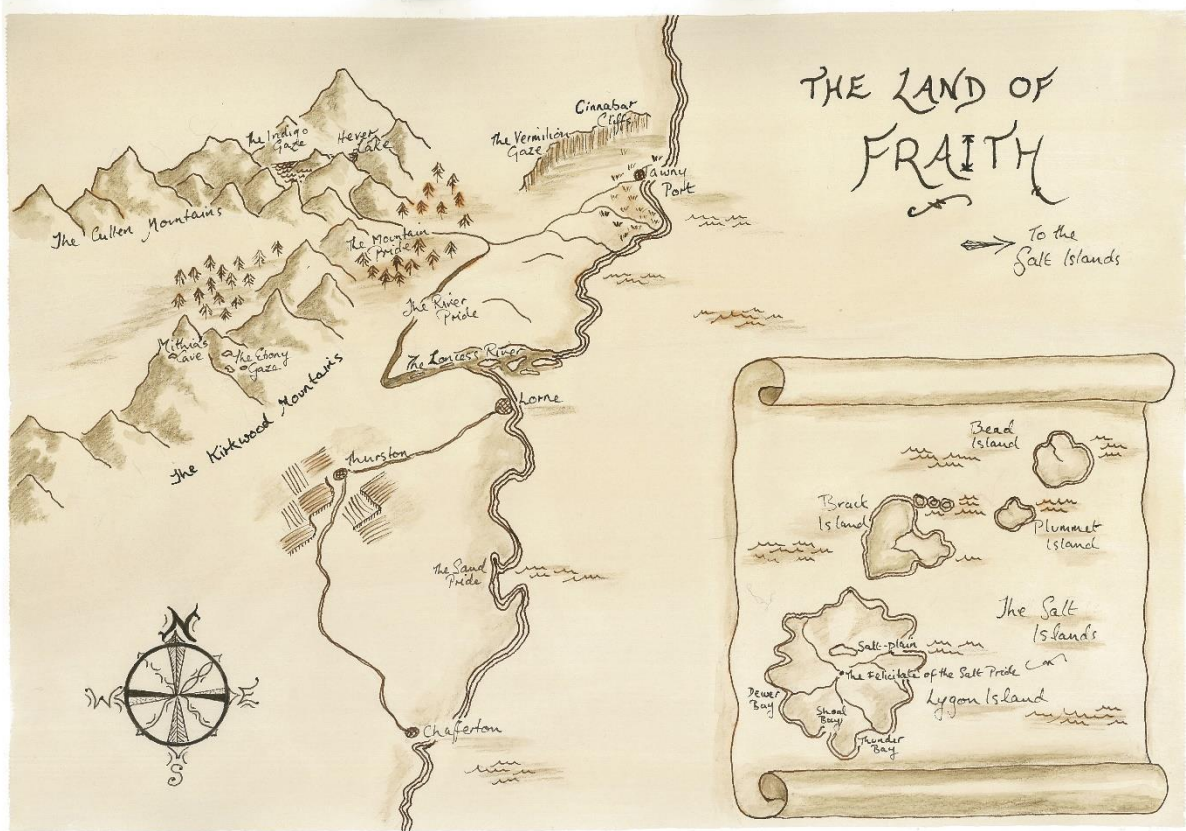
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MAP OF FRAITH



ABOUT FRAITH

Fraith is a land in the southern hemisphere that is home to lygons, geflars, dragons, humans, and unique native animals and plants, including the great purple lyntrees.



1. LYGONS

Lygons are sleek, iridescent reptilian cats found throughout the land of Fraith. They live in prides which are usually, but not always, named after the terrain they rule, e.g. the Mountain Pride who live at the foot of the Kirkwood Mountains, the River Pride who live near the Loncess River. The Salt Pride is named after the Salt Islands that they created.

Each pride lives in a Felicitate, or communal dwelling, usually built into caves or a cliff. They each have a small local animal e.g. a scurria (a type of ground squirrel) with deft paws that serves them in exchange for protection from other predators.

Females are called cautas.

Males are called cautos.

Infants are called cauties.

If lygons wish to travel long distances they use a grid of pulsating purple energy lines, called lyg-lines, which cover the land.

Lygons lay eggs which they bury in the ground to incubate, and dig up when they are ready to hatch. Eggs are silver for cautas, or white with silver speckles for cautos. Cauties hatch out with white fur that takes a hint of colour from the tint of the skin underneath. As they reach maturity they shed their fur for brightly coloured scales. Some fur remains on their bellies and paws.

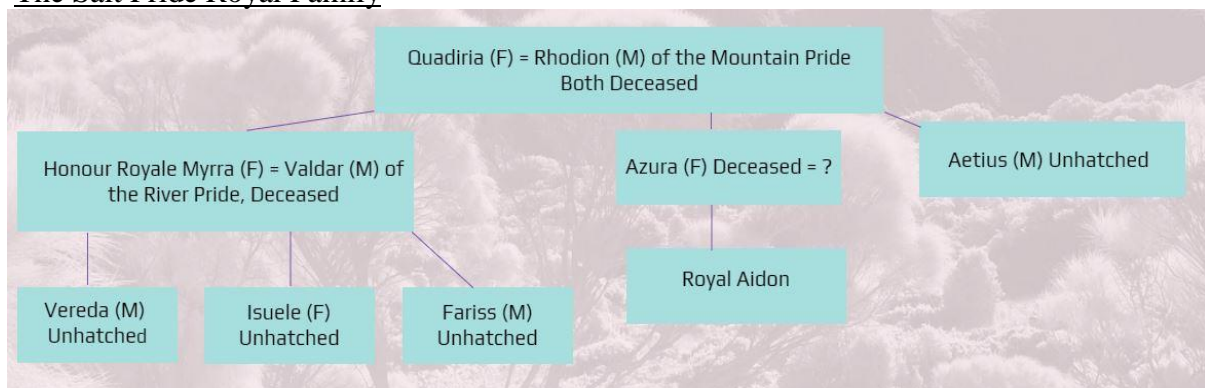
Adult lygons come in many colours. Red, blue and green are common. Royal lygons are purple, and this colour is maintained and enhanced by the regular consumption of lozenges made from lyntree nectar. Lyntree nectar not only imparts a beautiful sheen and depth of colour to the purple scales of royal lygons, it also acts as a tonic and provides the stamina they need for performing their royal duties, such as maintaining the balance of energy in their pride-lands.

Each pride has a royal family. The Royal/Royale will rule for 200 years before abdicating to their eldest offspring or nearest relative in the next generation. The ruler is supported by a Council of five to seven senior lygons, male and female, who help make key decisions and manage the affairs of the pride.

Lygons are quiet, secretive creatures who usually, but not always, hunt alone. Their Felicitates are in areas remote from human habitation, and to human eyes are indistinguishable from the cliff or cave in which they are built. It is so long since any human has seen one that they have dropped from human awareness, and humans can no longer see the dimension or energy level in which the lygons live. These days even if one was in sight, a human would not 'see' it. An archetypal memory of these powerful, remarkable creatures remains in human consciousness, but it has been transmuted into a sense of 'gods'. Their name has gradually changed over time to 'the Ai-alyn', and they are now viewed by humans as gods of nature, i.e. wind, water, earth and fire. Lygons are aware of these human beliefs, and while they find them rather amusing, they treat them with respect.

THE SALT PRIDE

The Salt Pride Royal Family



The Salt Pride Councillors

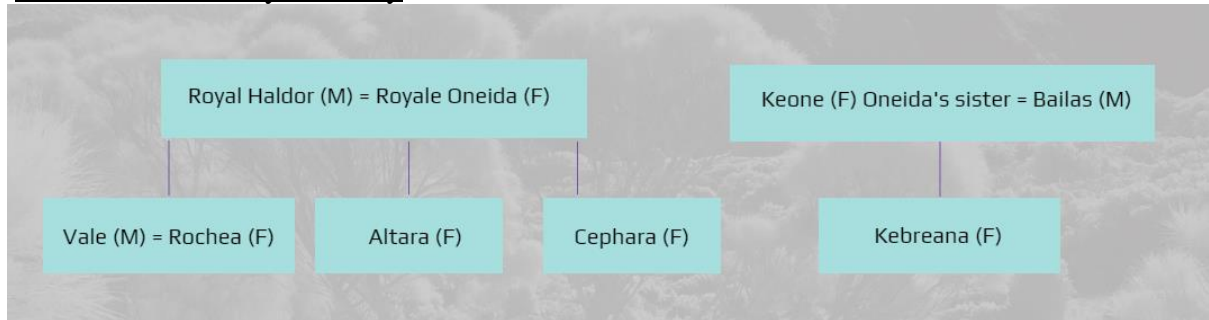
Royal Aidon – Head of Council
 Kebreana – Secretary
 Wirron – Senior Councillor
 Fintal – Councillor
 Biman – Councillor
 Jidhu – Councillor

Background

Myrra was the fifth ruler of the Salt Pride to preside over Lygon Island as their pride-lands. Before that they lived on the mainland of Fraith with all the other lygon prides. There came a time, however, when the lygon population expanded at the same time as human settlements on the mainland began to encroach upon traditional pride-lands. Other issues also came into play, and after much antagonism and agonising debate it was decided that there were no longer sufficient pride-lands for all the prides to prosper and avoid constant contact with humans. Some lygons opted to go, and with the help of the Emerald dragons, they created the Salt Islands and have lived there very peacefully until now.

THE RIVER PRIDE

The River Pride Royal Family



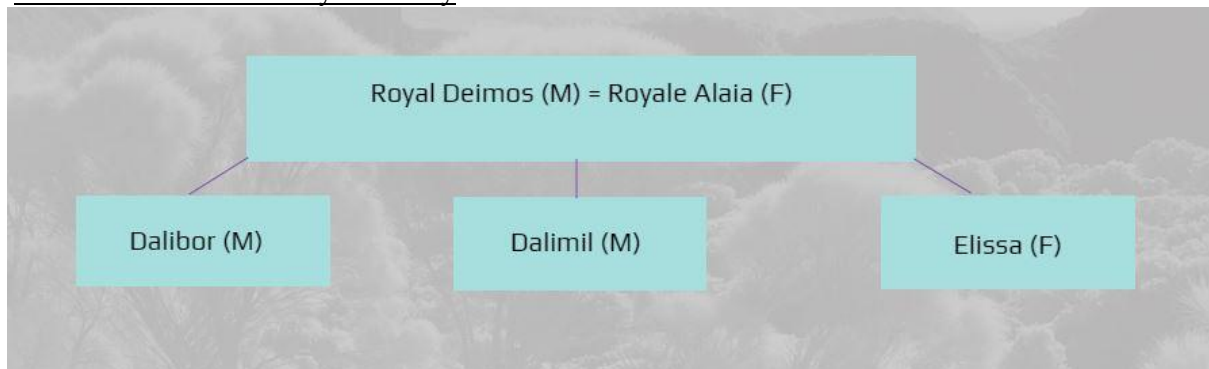
Background

The River Pride have built their Felicitate in and around caves in a cliff overlooking the Loncess River where it runs through a steep gorge. Back from the cliffs there are lush grasslands that extend to the forest at the base of the Kirkwood Mountains. These grasslands are home to the scurrias who are servants of the River Pride. As with all prides, they adopt a local animal with more deft paws to serve them in exchange for protection from other predators including, when possible, from dragons.

In the middle of the grasslands is a gentle valley, formed by a stream that runs into the Loncess River. In this valley the scurrias grow the beautiful dezigild flowers from which they make dezigild spice that is the signature flavour of adoration cakes.

THE MOUNTAIN PRIDE

The Mountain Pride Royal Family



Background

The Mountain Pride live at the foot of the Kirkwood Mountains. Until recently they had made their Felicitate in a large cave close to a stream that runs down from Hever Lake. This had been an ideal location with shelter, water and an abundance of food from both the forest and nearby grass plains. Deimos and Alaia managed their pride-lands well. Their only grief was that their two sons were lazy, defiant, and showed no aptitude for ruling. Their youngest cutie, Elissa, was born an unusually strong shade of purple – signifying considerable powers – and yet was unlikely ever to rule with two brothers ahead of her. They made great efforts to


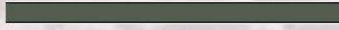
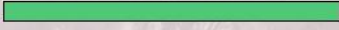
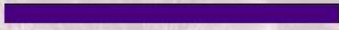

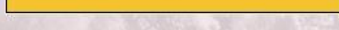
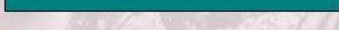

find her a suitable consort in the hope that she would be able to utilise her skills by helping to rule other pride-lands, but no suitors had been forthcoming, because all the eligible royalets found her intimidating. In recent times a greater trouble has beset the pride.

The Indigo Dragon Gaze live just above them on an island in Hever Lake. They have been emanating a great sadness, and their leader Isparag is either unaware of it, or unable to address it. The miasma of this sadness has been seeping down from the lake and affects the whole environment, including the Mountain Pride, The cautos have been particularly badly affected. The cautas have tired of the constantly depressed state of the cautos, and taken action.



2. DRAGONS

The dragons of Fraith live in family groups called gazes. The ruler of each gaze is known as the Charm. The members of each family group are a distinctive colour. There are eight main gazes:

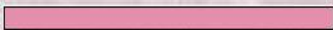
Azure	
Ebony	
Emerald	
Indigo	
Ruby	
Saffron	
Teal	
Vermilion	

Charm of the Ebony Dragons – Eiluned

Charm of the Indigo Dragons – Isparag

Charm of the Vermilion Dragons – Volborg

There is also a secret Peace Keeper Dragon, Charmor Mithia Eirenica. His existence is known only to his protectors, the Ebony Gaze. The scales of this beautiful dragon are shimmering shades of pink, white and cream, and his main colour is a shade of pink called:

Charm	
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Humans are still aware of dragons, and able to see them, as dragons are very large (much larger than lygons) and it is not in their nature to go unnoticed. Dragons can read minds and conceal themselves from sight if they wish. They do not cross paths with humans very often, as dragons live in remote areas and travel by flying. Occasionally dragons will eat human livestock, but prefer larger game such as geranopes and caralos.

Dragons generally live in caves, and like to keep a big fire blazing. If it begins to go out, a snort of flame will quickly get it going again.



3. HUMANS

The Mainland

On the mainland people live in towns or rural communities.

Lorne is a small port on the mouth of the Loncess River.

Tawny Port is a smaller community built up on poles in a brackish marshland. It acts as the main port access to the mining operation at Cinnabar Cliffs.

When the lygons established the Salt Islands, some humans went there with them to start a new and more peaceful life. They settled into two tribes, which they call myrids. Myrid is also their word for village; so a myrid is both a community and a place. Their council is called the Myridote, and council members are Myridiles. Each full-moon (known as a round-moon) they trade goods with the geflars. They believe that the geflars live as monks in a monastery on top of the mountain and worship the Ai-aly. They see the goods they provide to the geflars as offerings to their gods.

Long ago humans lost the ability to see lygons, but they have remained in their consciousness as great and beautiful creatures who have attained the status of gods.

Mainland Characters

Lydia - thirteen years old, psychic, daughter of the Magistrate of Lorne

Anne - early twenties, seamstress from Lorne

Benedict Royston - late twenties, Police Inspector of Lorne

Jeremy Williams - early thirties, Police Inspector of Thurston (a town inland from Lorne)

Charlesworth Thorogoode - late thirties, wealthy merchant from Lorne

Hindle - Thorogoode's assistant

Captain Barclay - Captain of the ship *Integrity*, merchant trader

Pepper - First Mate on the *Integrity*

Josh and Jake - fishermen from Lorne

Other sailors

Lygon Island

The Aai – the myrid (community) in the forest on the mountain. Their role is to produce the annual supply of lyntree lozenges. The eldest son of the Chief has the formal role of guarding the salt-plain, which is a sacred site.

The Brycthns – the myrid (community) on the coast. Their role is to harvest the seastring that is used for making jewellery, and to catch and dry fish - mostly salfish, but sometimes larger varieties.

Both myrids:

- * breed verapin and make cheese from their milk, eat and dry the meat, make parchment and leather-goods from the hides, and cloth from the wool
- * make painted wooden beads that they use for jewellery and to decorate their clothes
- * make dyes and inks from various plants, minerals and shells
- * enjoy reading the scribe-tales written by the geflars

Island Characters

The Aai:

Gam - current Chief of the Aai, widowed

Jay - elder son of Chief Gam and the Watcher of the salt-plain

Hal - younger son of Chief Gam

Cas - Chief Gam's father, deceased

The Healer – old medicine man

Lai - woman Hal finds attractive

Daz - Lai's partner

Mae - widow

Koh - former Chief of the Aai, deceased

Ben - Koh's son and senior member of the Myridote

The Brycthns:

Tyjepp - the Elder of the Brycthns

Keffyl - Tyjepp's wife

Pethyn - Keffyl's sister

Rhosyn - Pethyn's daughter

Jemyla - Rhosyn's friend

Carthyn - member of the Myridote

Adalyn - member of the Myridote, widowed

GLOSSARY



ADORATION CAKES - delicious biscuity cakes flavoured with dezigild spice

AI-ALYN, THE - gods worshipped by the humans of Fraith

BIRNOLS - small furry flying mammals who live in nests in trees and eat fruit

BIRRN TREE - tree with attractive soft foliage; the dark red berries are used to make wine

BONATO - starchy roots like yam/potato

CARALOS - large wild cattle with long horns

CAUTA - female lygon

CAUTO - male lygon

CAUTIE - infant lygon

CHARM - leader of a dragon gaze

CONSPECTATE - patio on top of a Felicitate

DEWERS - small dark blue birds who live in caves and eat fruit

DEZIGILD FLOWERS - flowers that come in seven colours, used to make dezigild spice

DRAGINE – female dragon

DRAGON - male dragon/dragons in general

FALCAWS - large blue and white fruit eating birds that nest in birrn trees

FARSIFY - a potent herb that absorbs the energy of where it is grown

FELICITATE - communal home of a lygon pride

GAZE - a group of dragons

GEFLARS - miniature dragons

GERANOPES - wild antelope

GISHAWK - raptor with grey plumage, lives a long time

GNARLS - wizened old forest people in children's tales

JEWELBERRIES - pale yellow berries used to make juice, jam, wine etc

LONGWHISKERS - the geflars' nickname for Secretary Kebreana

LYG-LINES - the purple energy lines lygons use for travel

LYGONS - sleek, iridescent reptilian cats

LYNTREE - large purple trees that live for thousands of years, native to Fraith

MARLOOS - small, moth eating rodents who live in the roots of lyntrees

MYRID - a village/a tribe

MYRIDILE - a member of the myridote or council

MYRIDOTE - council of a myrid or tribe

OSSIAR TREE - a tree with weeping branches and large orange flowers which produce a lot of nectar

PEROMYLS - beach mice who serve the Sand Pride

PERSEFRUIT - a round blue fruit with firm skin that tastes slightly minty

PLUMMETS - small dark-grey mottled seabirds with red beaks

PRIDE - a group of lygons

PURRING - lygons are each allocated a dragon and purr to release any emotional distress of that dragon. Dragons are unaware of this. Lygons do it to keep dragons more even tempered, which is good for everyone.

QUARTZUP - a drink made by Mithia the dragon from fermented herbs and crystal water

ROUND-MOON - time of a full-moon

SALFISH - small silver fish that are rather chewy to eat

SALGULLS - large grey gulls who eat salfish

SALTGRINDER - the geflars' nickname for Royal Aidon

SCRIBE-TALES - stories written by geflars, often inspired by dragons

SCURRIAS - ground squirrels who serve some mainland lygon prides

SEA-STRING - a fine seaweed that is dried and used to thread beaded jewellery

SEEDPECKERS - small brown birds

SLOAMS - large fat rodents with big eyes who live in the branches of trees

SUN-CYCLE - a year

TARMEGAL – large fish common in bays and estuaries

THUNDER-SHELLS – enormous black seashells with special powers

VENGE-WAVE - a tsunami

VERAPINS - a large sheep/goat like animal with soft shaggy fleece

WHYLE BLOSSOM - a delicate white flower that is used to infuse wine with a floral note



EXCERPTS FROM

LYGON ISLAND – THE ROCK RING

CHAPTER 1



A gust of wind stirred the salt-plain. Fine white grains clouded the air as they swirled around the dark boulders, then settled. Myrra covered her eyes with her paws to keep out the stinging salt. Then the air stilled, the moon broke through the clouds and the plain was quiet once again.

It was too quiet tonight – even the young Watcher was asleep in his hut and unaware of Myrra’s visit. She brushed the salt from her scales and sadly rubbed her forehead on the boulder that marked the location of the younger brother she had never known.

‘If only you had hatched, Aetius my love. If only I had been able to pass the succession on to you, and not my nephew Aidon. I am so very afraid of what he might do, and none of us knows how to stop him . . .’ She gazed through her tears to the other side of the plain where three small boulders indicated where each of her own lifeless eggs were buried. ‘If only any one of you had hatched, and I had not spent all those sun-cycles reigning alone, for it all to come to this . . .’

The island was uneasy tonight. Myrra’s sleep had been restless. In her dreams the heart of the island trembled and great cracks tore open across the salt-plain. So, in the eerie stillness, she had risen from her cushion in the Felicitate and come down to the salt-plain to make sure her kin were safe.

She had arrived to find the salt-plain looking just the same as ever. Surrounded by dense forest, the smooth expanse of white salt crystals sparkled in the moonlight. Dark boulders dotted the surface, interspersed with clumps of scrubby grass. Salt-lizards and other small animals scuttled around the boulders and scruffled gently amongst the leaves in the forest looking for food. All was peaceful.

Recent arguments with her nephew had left her weary and worried, so it was a relief to have a moment when she could be quiet, and still. Then Myrra smiled sadly and whispered, ‘I feel guilty that it’s been so long – but you all seem just as safe as ever.’ She turned to leave. ‘Take care, all my loved ones, I promise I shall not leave it so long before I visit again.’

The sky had lightened slightly, and the pre-dawn chill penetrated her bones. She felt rather foolish to have been driven here by fears that were only dreams. She had gone to bed worried, it was true, for after dinner Royal Aidon had suddenly called the Councillors for a meeting. It was an unusual time for a Council meeting; she was fairly sure she knew his intent, and that no good would come of it. Best then that she return and get what sleep she could, for at the very least she would have disgruntled Councillors to placate when the sun rose.

But even as she left, the ground trembled in fear of what was to come.

From the Chronicle of the Royal Aidon:

I wait in eager anticipation for my Royal Retreat. At first light it will happen. The Councillors have duly acceded to my wisdom on this. I have been more than patient with them, allowing them to voice all and any of their concerns – as a Royal, I do know that these projects have better outcomes if one brings the participants along with one. So, as I have recorded here over the last couple of moon-cycles, I have listened to all their prattling on about environmental impacts and island energies (in all of which I could hear the dulcet tones of my most dear Aunt, Honour Royale Myrra). But eventually they have had the good sense to see that none of that, in my mind, outweighs the great benefit, to me, of having a Royal Retreat.

So tomorrow morning, there will be the most beautiful islet in the middle of Shoal Bay, and throughout posterity I will be thanked for it. It will have green lawns, and salt-sand paths around a very modest three-storey stone villa.

And it will indeed be a villa – a beautiful residence just for me. It will absolutely not be another communal Felicitate. I have always found the notion of an entire lygon pride living together to be utterly abhorrent, and the demands of life in a Felicitate to be beyond tedious.

I am sure I shall hardly be able to sleep tonight with excitement, for in only a few hours I will have a beautiful suite of rooms with a view of the ocean and a smaller suite facing the beach for the rare guest I may invite across. Most importantly I will have a studio where I can paint and embroider, and a terrace where I can lie in the sun and read scribe-tales.

I have forbidden them from planting any of those unappealing lyntrees on my islet. Only the beautiful, gentle foliage of the birrn tree, some of that highly scented night-ivy, and a variety of delicious berry bushes will grace my garden.

I have also forbidden them to bring any of those disgusting lyntree lozenges in with the supplies. I shall consume them only as I see fit – which is to say – not at all.

Ah, hurry along blessed morning of the creation of my Royal Retreat – I await you!

When she returned from the salt-plain to her room it took Myrra some time to settle. She turned around and around on her cushion before she found a comfortable way to curl up, with her face away from the window, shielded from the slowly intensifying glow of the morning sky.

She had drifted into a light doze when she felt the floor of the great sandstone Felicitate shake with the trembling of the island. In her heart she felt the tearing apart.

With a predator's instinct she was instantly alert.

She did not bother to open her eyes. There would be nothing worth looking at in her room, other than the wavering of the stone walls and the swaying of objects on the shelves. From the great roar of water out in the bay, and the hiss of steam like a bucket of water tossed onto a raging fire, Myrra knew Royal Aidon's plan had not gone well.

'I told him not to do it,' she thought angrily, as she stretched herself awake.

She could hear the shouts of the myrid people – some down near the bay, others in the mountains – and feel their calls to her. They were frightened, some were injured, some dead. Such fragile creatures. 'I told him.'

She opened her golden eyes, and still sleepy from her disturbed night, spent some time licking the purple scales on her front paws. She admired the deep glow of their colour in the early sun. As she smoothed her whiskers, she called 'Zebber!'

Her geflar burst out of the fireplace in a cloud of soot, so instantaneously that he could only have been waiting her call. He dusted himself down, and blew the ash back into the fireplace with a blast from his nostrils.

'Your Honour,' he bowed, 'Have you seen it?'

‘No Zebber, I have not yet afforded myself that delight. Come with me to the window while I survey the handiwork of my beloved nephew.’

‘Your Honour?’ Zebber hesitated, and Myrra smiled at him, because they had discussed the possibility of this moment, and how it might look, many times in the last couple of quarter-moons. ‘Your Honour – it is not as you might expect.’

She twitched the whiskers above her eyes to indicate that she was not surprised, then she stretched thoroughly, as her joints were stiffening with age. She ached more in the mornings than she remembered; the last three sun-cycles had taken their toll on her health, and on the health of the island. Awakening to the effects of an earthquake in the bay, and further proof of her nephew’s incompetence, had not been beneficial. She rose from her cushion and padded across to where Zebber was waiting by the window, looking out on Shoal Bay.

Every morning of her reign, as soon as she rose from her cushion, she had gone straight to the window and balanced her pride-lands, the Salt Islands of the Solace Sea. For all the two-hundred and fifty-three sun-cycles of her life the view from her window in the Felicitate had been the same. She had looked out upon a gentle curve of blue water, thick with salt. It was edged by white beaches that sparkled with salt-sand, and enclosed by mountains wrapped in lush forest. The only feature that had varied had been the clouds.

Every morning she had ranged her senses across the island and nearby waters. She had listened to the thoughts of the myriad people, noting their needs. She had looked for changes that had been wrought by growth or decay or weather, and the tufts of fur on her ears would twitch when she noticed an area that needed adjusting. She balanced the natural energies so that they worked in harmony. Most importantly, she purified the energy of the salt-plain. Usually this task took her only a few moments, but they were the most intense, and crucial moments of the day.

Balancing the territory was the most important duty of the Royal. It was a duty that despite her expert instruction her nephew either could not, or would not, perform to even an adequate standard; let alone the excellence that she had sustained.

Three sun-cycles ago, despite her misgivings, she had acted as decreed by lygon law. After two-hundred sun-cycles as Royale, she was required to abdicate. She had no live offspring, so she had been forced to bestow her royal duties on her nearest relative in the next generation – who happened to be her nephew Aidon – and she had stepped aside to become Honour Royale.

They had been a disappointing three sun-cycles.

A troublesome three sun-cycles.

Things were declining, not improving.

Her nerves were worn – she and the island were increasingly slipping out of balance, and the events of this morning would only make things worse.

When first alerted to his plan to create an islet in Shoal Bay to use as a royal retreat Myrra had been unsure what to do. She was sensitive to his limited capacity for understanding, and so decided to confront Royal Aidon with only the most obvious of the many disastrous consequences that she could foresee. He had ignored both her and his Councillors. She had expected this to happen, and wondered why she had even bothered to feel annoyed.

Heeding the caution in Zebber’s voice, she walked the well-worn track to her window with her eyes partly closed. In one way she did not need to actually see the result of her nephew’s labours, as she could feel it. It tore her heart, as it had torn the bay.

Zebber coughed politely. Myrra opened her eyes and stared out at the centre of the bay.

‘My Salt!’ she laughed, ‘It’s hideous!’

She leaned on the window-sill, put her purple paws over her golden eyes and laughed, and laughed, until her breath caught in her lungs and tears dripped off her whiskers. Then she calmed a little, wiped her eyes with the back of her paw, looked out at the bay, exclaimed 'It's absolutely hideous!' and laughed all over again.

Myrra heard much flustering outside her door as Secretary Wirron and Councillor Fintal arrived to give her an account of the morning's events. Each was urging the other to enter first. She waited patiently, and after a few moments they entered together. Wirron's green scales and Fintal's blue scales were decidedly lustreless from the stress they had endured. Their tails drooped, and so did their whiskers. They came before Myrra and sat upright with their paws neatly together. They stared at the cushion on which she was sitting, because they could not meet her gaze.

'Your Honour, I will do my best, my very best, to explain what happened this morning. Oh, this morning,' sighed Secretary Wirron, his voice shaking as much with anxiety as with age. 'We all know that even though the Royal Aidon's wish seemed very simple, very simple indeed – especially, without meaning any disrespect – that it seemed simple to him. But it was really a very complex matter. We all know that one cannot just create an islet at whim. No, one cannot.'

'Well . . . that's not quite true, Wirron, because of course we *can*,' corrected Myrra. 'You know as well as I do *how* to do it – on a whim or otherwise – but you also know, as well as I do, that it *should* not be done on a whim. The consequences are too many and too widespread to ever risk an act such as this, without a very good reason, and careful planning.'

'This whole chain of islands; all of Lygon Island and the other Salt Islands, were created by our ancestors to provide a safe and peaceful home for our pride. But it takes an enormous amount of energy to establish a place, a very long time to get it running, and even longer to recover from the effort. So once you have a place created, settled, harmony established, it is ludicrous to make any big change, unless the motivation is dire need or survival. A retreat for the Royal so that he can avoid his duties is just not appropriate.'

'No indeed, Your Honour,' agreed Wirron, 'of course that is so. As we well know. And that, I am afraid, is why our hearts, our poor hearts, were not in the task. We were performing it merely from a sense of duty, just duty, rather than with conviction. And so . . . ' Wirron's voice faltered.

'And so, Your Honour,' Councillor Fintal took up the tale, 'our hearts were heavy with doubt when we started. We performed the ceremony with meticulous accuracy. The room, the ornamentation – all was as it should be. We came to the part of the ceremony where we retracted our claws, sat on our haunches and linked our front-paws. We entwined our tails so that we were all twice-linked, and began to draw in the energy from the bay, attuning it with our own collective energy. We pictured the islet, exactly as instructed by Royal Aidon, down to the last minute detail, and situated it, in our envisionment, exactly where he had said . . . ' Councillor Fintal paused, suddenly overcome with grief, 'But at the moment when we should have opened our hearts and linked the old and new versions of the bay together, and moved the energy to flow from the old version to the new one . . . At that moment, when all our strength should have been there, flowing in harmony for the task . . . at that moment we faltered.'

'It was not any one of us,' Wirron explained. 'But something that happened to us all. To all of us at the same time. There was suddenly this heaviness in the energy. It would not flow, and we could not hold our vision. We could not hold it at all. Our vision just somehow congealed, dropped like a stone and shattered. Shattered all through the room in tiny fragments of coloured light.'

‘We felt the trembling of the ground, and the roar of the bay, as though the island was angry, most dreadfully angry with us for trying to force this change; and we were afraid. Your Honour,’ Wirron’s voice faltered, ‘we were very afraid of what we had done. We sat silent for a long time before we dared to look.’

‘To be honest,’ said Fintal, ‘we were relieved that it did not look worse.’

‘My Councillors,’ Myrra said with a tender voice. ‘My dear Councillors, and long trusted friends. I am so sorry. Sorry you were forced to do this, sorry it went awry, sorry that I feel in my heart that our troubles will be more than a few ugly rocks. How is my nephew taking this?’

There was an awkward silence, as the Councillors tried to conceal the involuntary twitching of their tails. The memory of the diatribe delivered by the Royal Aidon that morning was not something they wished to either recall, or discuss.

‘Not well, I gather?’ Myrra smiled gently.

‘Aahh, no, Your Honour. No.’ Wirron said quietly, with his head bowed. ‘He is of the opinion that we are either intrinsically, or deliberately, incompetent. He has yet to decide which – but either way . . . either way . . . he has made it clear that the debacle, and all unforeseen consequences are entirely and utterly our fault – and we will pay. Of that I am sure. We will pay.’

After they had left, Myrra snorted derisively and curled up on her favourite cushion with her head slumped on her front paws. She allowed Zebber to climb up and polish the scales at the back of her neck with lyntree oil. She doubted it would improve her mood, but at least Zebber would feel better if he was doing something to care for her.

‘Zebber, I confess I have no idea what to do. I did my best to train him to be a Royal. For a long time I was so patient with his lack of progress. I went right back to the most basic principles. I explained things as simply as I could. I drew diagrams for him. I tried to get the different energies resonating through him so that he would know how it felt when he got it right – but he couldn’t seem to tell the difference. Eventually I realised that the issue was not just his lack of aptitude, it was also his complete lack of interest in the role of ruler.’

‘But Your Honour, he clearly relishes the position.’

‘Oh yes – he relishes the status of it, but refuses to take any of the responsibility.’

She remembered back sadly to when she was a little cutie. She had barely been able to reach the stone window-sill with her soft paws. For as long as she could remember, she had been very aware that it would be her duty one day to rule the island, and she had wanted to do it well. She could not remember a moment when she had not cared about every detail of her surroundings. Every morning she would stretch up and nestle her damp pink nose on her front paws to sniff the breeze; her fine whiskers would sense the coming weather, and the tufts of fur on her ears would sense the mood of the myriad people. Little strands of her translucent fur used to catch on the rough stone of the window-sill and stay behind wafting in the breeze, until her geflar brushed them away. Later, when she came of age – after her Salting Ceremony, when her fur fell away to reveal the royal purple scales beneath, and her claws lengthened, and her tail grew strong and whip-like – she had sat by the window with her wise and gentle mother, and learned the duties of a monarch.

Training Aidon had mostly comprised of frustrating attempts to wake him in the morning, or to find him. When she did corner him for a lesson he spent most of the time staring out the window muttering ‘Yes, I know that . . .’ in an exasperated tone, when clearly he hadn’t heard a word she’d said. Only a couple of days ago, when she had seen him formally for the umpteenth time about his latest plans: ‘Yes Aunt . . .’ *How dare he call her that, in such a tone of voice; as though he were the long-suffering party in the relationship!*

‘You have said all this before . . .’ *Barely concealed yawn as though the meeting was tedious,*
‘I have noted your opinion, and that of the Councillors . . .’ *Opinion – they were stating facts!*
‘And have nonetheless decided to proceed, as is my Royal right.’ *His right? What about his duty!*

The scales down her back ruffled and caught on each other at the memory of it. Zebber coughed politely as it had thrown him off balance. She twitched to lay them smooth again, and Zebber resumed polishing her scales with the aromatic lyntree oil.

‘You are right, Your Honour, for it is not in the Royal Aidon’s nature to think further ahead than his next meal, or how he will entertain himself while he digests it.’

‘Teffer! Where are you?’ Zebber called as he scampered on his lizardy feet and flapped his wings all along the geflars’ private passage. The passage ran behind the many fireplaces in the Felicitate, and could be accessed both from the fireplaces, and the stairs from the geflars’ entrance at the back of a cave under the Felicitate. They had, in effect, a secondary residence discretely enclosed within the main one. He glanced in quickly as he ran past the open doors of the weaving room, the pigment mixing room, the kitchen, the library, the manuscript room . . . ‘Teffer! . . . Ah! There you are.’ Zebber spotted him in the manuscript room just as he rushed past. He skidded to a halt, folded his wings and entered the manuscript room sedately, as one was expected to do, with so many valuable manuscripts and inks lying around.

‘Have you seen it?’

Teffer looked up from the document he was writing, ‘Who hasn’t? We’ve all been up to the Conspectate – you get a good view from there – not that anyone would want to see it. It’s a disaster. Everyone on the island must have felt the tremors. Both the myrids have been affected. The waves caused a catastrophe in Shoal Bay – maybe it affected the other islands as well – who knows? We’ve been busy fixing some of the damage while you were occupied with Her Honour this morning. By the way, how has she taken it?’

‘She laughed.’

‘Laughed?’

‘That or cry,’ said Zebber sadly.

‘I suppose laugh is the better option – although I have no doubt she will cry later in private. Anyway, while you were with her several geflars went to burn away logs and debris caught on a ledge half-way down the waterfall, and to move some rocks that had fallen into one of the drinking pools. I would have gone, but the big Saltgrinder wanted me to take the minutes of his Council meeting.’

‘Really Teffer, you’ve got to stop calling Royal Aidon that – you’ll get us all into trouble. Is that what you are writing out? The minutes? What did he say?’ Zebber leaned over Teffer’s shoulder to see what he was writing.

‘So much and so fast I could hardly keep up,’ Teffer complained. ‘That’s why I’m having to write it all out again. Here, I’ll read you a bit: *Give me one good reason why any of you should remain Councillors after this . . . I gave you such a simple task and you have completely botched it . . . I want it fixed!* Does that give you the general idea? Seems to miss the point that the Councillors are appointed for life, that he was asking the impossible, and I doubt that anyone can fix it. Oh, and here’s another bit you’ll like: *Even with four of you, you couldn’t manage! I knew I should have waited until Councillor Kebreana was back – she would have made it work. I need more capable cautas like her on the Council, and fewer doddery old cautos like you.*’

‘Ha!’ said Zebber, ‘Madam Longwhiskers. Indeed. I’m not disputing that more cautas on the Council might be a good thing – but one of *her* is quite enough. I am sure that if she had been here and it had gone well it would have been all her doing; and if it had not, it

would have been everyone else's fault. I have been most grateful not to have had to deal with her the last couple of quarter-moons. When is she due back?'

'Day after tomorrow, I believe,' said Teffer.

'Ah well. I am sure we will be treated to . . .' Zebber pushed out his belly, made his eyes wide and imitated Kebreana in a manner that was both flirtatious and imperious at the same time. *'My Royal! Oh, my Royal! How has this been allowed to happen? If only you had waited for my return! So remiss of you, my dearest Royal. You know I would have made sure you had exactly what you wanted. You know I understand your needs better than all these fussy old cautos. Of course you should have just the most perfect islet for your retreat. It is so important for you to have somewhere to go and rest from your onerous duties, and regain your energy. All the demands on you! Of course you need somewhere to rest. How disappointing that, once again, they have let you down. How little they understand . . .* Then she will bustle around and tell us all how to fix it.'

'Indeed she will,' Teffer laughed, 'but, as usual, I doubt she really knows. And she will drive poor Myrra to distraction with it all. I suspect we are just going to have to wait for the Saltgrinder to stop dispensing his grains of anger and disappointment, and get used to it.'

'Perhaps. So, how are the myrid people?' asked Zebber.

'Not good,' said Teffer. 'Because it is so close to the beach the Brycthns' myrid was damaged by the waves. The Aai in the mountains had to contend with falling trees. It's a pity humans have such a fragile structure and casing; that they break and tear so easily, and mend slowly. Some are damaged, some have died, and they are all grieving. That's another problem with the Saltgrinder – he has so little regard for the myrid people that he didn't even mention them in his meeting with the Council this morning. He refused our offer to consult with them about his plan and said he couldn't see how it was any of their business what he chose to do. He didn't even warn them it was going to happen. They had no chance to prepare and be safe; and now they are all in disarray. He has no understanding of how dependant we are upon them.'

'That,' agreed Zebber, 'is unfortunately true. Anyway, speaking of humans – how's your latest scribe-tale about dragons going? Weren't there some humans in that?'

'Oh, yes. It's going well. What's a really preposterous name for a male human? A do-goodey type of knight?' asked Teffer.

'Erm, once on the mainland I heard of a Cadwallader, or how about a Eustace, or a Godwin?'

'Godwin! That might work. Sir Godwin slays the mighty dragon . . .'

'What?' exclaimed Zebber. 'A human slaying a dragon? I thought this was meant to be a mythical tale, not complete nonsense! Where did you get that idea from?'

'I just thought it might cheer the myrid people in their current predicament,' Teffer smiled.

'A noble intent,' said Zebber, 'but please maintain some semblance of reality.'

From the Chronicle of the Royal Aidon:

This morning the Councillors made a start on the creation of my glorious Royal Retreat – a small island, just for me, right in the centre of calm, beautiful Shoal Bay; adorned with a majestic villa and fragrant garden. The foundations of my islet – a great circle of imposing rocks – now stands in Shoal Bay. It is true that I had presumed it would be instantly created in its entirety – however, it would seem that my Councillors were not fully in possession of the powers I had been led to believe that they had, and were unable to perform as expected. It would also appear that some of their recent dissembling may well have been an attempt on their part to conceal this fact from me. Other rulers, I am sure, would have punished them

harshly. However, I am compassionate. I will give them time to restore their energies and then build on the foundations that they have established out in the bay.

The salt-tears ran slowly down the mauve scales on Aidon's cheeks as he sat by his chamber window looking at the miserable bunch of rocks that were meant to be his beautiful little islet. How did he come to be cursed with such a hopeless, foolish group of Councillors? It was so unfair.

Such a small, simple request, and for several moon-cycles they had argued and fussed and tried to dissuade him. But he had been strong. He had stood up to them. He had stood by his conviction, and he had insisted that they do as he asked. He was the Royal Aidon, after all. Now he understood why they had been so reluctant to grant his wish – they were trying to hide their incompetence.

They must have known that they couldn't do it. They must have known all along, and tried to distract him with all that talk. All that tedious jargon about keeping the island's energies in balance, all that pontificating about the long-term and unforeseen consequences of making a major change without good reason. All that nonsense about him wanting to put it just where the Brycthns dive to harvest the seastring that they dry to make jewellery, and it being the breeding ground for those chewy little salfish the myrid people eat and provide as offerings. What nonsense – as if the seastring wouldn't grow in other bays, and the salfish find somewhere else to lay their eggs.

Well, Lygon Island seemed exactly the same to him now as it had done when he took over as Royal, except that now it had some lousy jagged rocks in the bay where he had imagined his luxurious little play-ground. Surely a retreat for the Royal, somewhere he could go to avoid all these tedious Councillors and that dreadful Aunt of his, and relax and enjoy himself – surely that was a perfectly good reason for creating a beautiful little islet in the middle of the bay?

But they had ruined his dream, and he didn't know what to do, or who to turn to, to fix it. When he had berated the Councillors this morning they had looked such a bunch of fools, with their scales all dull, and their whiskers drooping. It was pretty clear they did not have a clue how to fix it up, and he wouldn't trust them even if they said they could.

Then there was his Aunt.

He could not bear to even imagine what she might say. She always spoke to him in that impatient, rather exasperated tone of voice. It set his poor nerves on edge. He got so tense around her that he could never take in a word she said – not that he wanted to, because she was worse than the Councillors. She was always pontificating, always lecturing him about the tedious need to 'balance the island energies'. She insisted that this tiresome task had to be done the moment he arose when his energies were 'fresh and clear before the bustle of the day', but Salt knows he simply could not contemplate it until after a hearty breakfast. And of course, there were days when it just slipped his mind altogether.

He was pretty sure she could fix his islet if she wanted to, but would probably refuse.

Councillor Kebreana would be back soon. Such a competent cauta. One of the best things he had done was to make her a Councillor. She knew how to make him feel better. She always knew just the right soothing things to say. She knew when to shush all those other Councillors out of the room and bring him his embroidery.

She might even know how to fix it. After all, she came from the River Pride. They were always having to redirect the Loncess River when it flooded, and create or get rid of little islands that formed when it changed its path in the lowlands. She had told him all about it. She wouldn't have the power on her own, but she might be able to work out something with

his Aunt. It would be worth asking her – and she would talk to his Aunt on his behalf, and save him that ordeal as well. Wonderful idea.

He went back to his cushions, smoothed the scales along his tail, twitched his whiskers in to place, and settled for a restorative nap.

Councillor Fintal collapsed on the big soft cushions in front of the fire in Wirron's room, while Wirron lowered himself down more slowly. The warmth of the fire was welcome, and the light gleamed softly on the rich colours of all the bound parchments that lined the walls. On one wall were all the manuscripts the original lygons had brought to the island, on another were the historical chronicles of events that had happened since the Salt Pride had moved to the island, and on a third wall were the scribe-tales written by the geflars since they arrived.

Geflars are creative creatures, and took to writing scribe-tales with alacrity. They would sit by the fire in the evening and listen to the lygons relate what they had discovered from their dragon-purring. They then went away and used these stories and accounts as the basis for their fictional tales. The lygons enjoyed reading them so much they suggested trading them to the myrid people to help them pass the evenings. The myrid people loved the stories – especially the long ones that ran over several parchments. They presumed that the tales were entirely fictional – it never occurred to them that they were actually based on events in the lives of very real dragons.

Wirron was proud of his parchment collection – he often thought that there was little difference between the historical chronicles with all their facts, and the scribe-tales that were elaborated or amalgamated versions of historical events. The main difference was in the entertaining style of the scribe-tales. He wondered for a moment how the geflars would record the events that were unfolding now.

'Well, that was a day with a dragon-curse on it if ever I lived one,' sighed an exhausted Fintal.

'Teffer!' Wirron called as reached over and rang a small bell near the fireplace. A few moments later Teffer jumped out of the fire. 'Teffer, any chance of some birrnberry wine for me and some water for Fintal?'

'But of course – I have been to the cellars and found you a particularly good vintage, as I sensed you might be needing it tonight.'

'Make sure the water is from the mountain stream,' said Fintal, 'and not the stream in the cave. I don't want to drink water contaminated by bat excrement.'

'Of course,' smiled Teffer, thinking the mountain stream would most likely have been tainted by the excrement of any number of other animals, even perhaps the odd bat flying over. 'I know your preference is for the mountain stream, and that is always the water I bring you. And would you both like me to warm some lyntree oil to rub into your scales?'

'That all sounds wonderful,' said Wirron. 'Thank you so much. Thank you.'

'I will just put the oil by the fire to warm while I fetch you wine and food.'

'Make sure you bring plenty of verapin,' reminded Fintal. 'I cannot abide all those tiny bones in marloo.'

Moments later Teffer returned with a tray laden with wine, water and roast meats, which he placed down between the two lygons. Then he set about massaging the fragrant oil into the scales down their backs. The green scales of Wirron, and the blue of Fintal soaked up the oil and gradually returned to their natural sheen. Soon the firelight was glinting off their scales and the lygons stretched out, each resting their chin on their front paws.

'Ah, that feels better. Much better. My poor scales had gone quite dull with the stress of it all,' said Wirron.

‘You excelled yourself at acting the dodderly fool in front of Aidon today,’ observed Fintal, sipping his water.

‘Unfortunately for once it was not entirely an act. Not really an act at all. I do feel very much my age at the moment. The events of the morning were exhausting, absolutely exhausting, and it took all my residual reserves of strength not to give that whingey little upstart a good claw around the ears. For indeed, it is no more than he deserves.’

‘He does not have the most endearing manner even on a good day. He certainly gave an impressive performance of self-pity this morning.’

‘Humph. We are the ones entitled to feel self-pity – not him.’ Wirron paused for a moment, then said despondently, ‘We are faced with spending the rest of our lives fulfilling the shameless, inconsistent whims of an idiot. An idiot!’

‘I am facing a great deal more of that than you are,’ Fintal observed wryly. ‘I never understood it until now, but I am beginning to see why other species resort to extermination of leaders they cannot abide.’

‘Fintal!’

‘I know.’

‘I am sure that is . . . that is treason! It is true that would appear an easy solution, if it were within our nature to do such a thing – which it isn’t – but then who would succeed him? I ask you – who would succeed him?’

‘True, there is no clear contender at the moment, and will not be until he breeds.’

‘And how likely is that?’

‘A certainty if Kebreana had her way,’ joked Fintal. For a few moments both lygons laughed at the thought of Kebreana’s designs on the Royal Aidon. It was the first small amusement in what had been a long and stressful day.

‘Ah, but we shouldn’t laugh,’ sighed Wirron. ‘No, we should not laugh, for as today has shown us, who knows what unfortunate things may occur?’

‘But surely not that?’

Teffer refilled their drinking bowls, and Fintal ripped off a particularly large, lean piece of verapin dripping with herb gravy.

‘Just as well we have absolute faith in our geflars – isn’t it Teffer?’ said Wirron, thanking him. ‘In some other courts a conversation such as ours might lead to dire consequences. *Dire* consequences.’

‘I assure my honoured Councillors that no geflar wastes feelings of respect on the Saltgrinder,’ Teffer smiled.

‘Saltgrinder? Is that what you geflars call him?’ asked Wirron.

‘Indeed it is, and that is probably also treasonous, so we must guard each other’s tender bellies on that count.’

‘On more serious matters – how bad do you think the damage to the island really is?’ Fintal asked Wirron.

‘Salt knows. It is certainly worse than we can possibly imagine. Myrra says her senses tell her that the damage is deep, very deep – down to a level that she does not understand.’

‘Really?’ said Fintal. ‘Then that truly concerns me, as there has never until this day been a change to these islands that she did not understand, or could not rectify. I confess, dear Wirron, that now I really do feel afraid. It had not occurred to me – to any of us – that there would ever be anything about these islands over which she did not have absolute control. I thought she was only declining to intervene because it is no longer her position to do so. I thought she was just trying to teach Aidon a lesson by leaving it like that. I thought that she could fix it if she wanted to.’

‘No. No, that is not the case.’ Wirron shook his head. ‘Sadly it looks as though for the foreseeable future we shall have to muddle along and endure. Just endure.’

‘Unless Myrra comes up with a brilliant idea.’

‘I think we have come to expect too much of her – and we tend to forget her considerable age, for she is nearly as old as I am. Nearly as old, and there is also the very important fact that she has abdicated. How sad that she cannot just relax and enjoy the peaceful retirement she deserves in a well-run pride.’

‘Speaking of well-run prides – or at least, one that knows how to get rid of difficult members at our expense – when is Kebreana due to return from her family visit to the River Pride?’

‘Any time is too soon, much too soon,’ smiled Wirron. ‘But I believe she is due back before the next Council meeting, the day after tomorrow.’

From the Chronicle of the Royal Aidon:

Soon Councillor Kebreana will return. I have rather missed her wisdom and infallible support. I have missed her ability to adroitly manage the other Councillors, to persuade my Aunt to see the sense in my ideas, and to capably organise my time. When she is here I can truly relax, secure in the knowledge that she will manage everything for me. When she returns I will be able to send her off to gain the cooperation of my most dear Aunt in the completion of my islet.

To fill in the hours until then, I have decided to continue my mural in the dining room. It occurred to me that it would be most inspirational to gaze (ha – but I am so witty) on a portrait of Isparag. Dear Reader, in case history has been remiss in its treatment of the noble Isparag when you come to read my Chronicle: Isparag is the most awe inspiring Charm of the Indigo Gaze. Dragons live in gazes the way we live in prides. I think pride is a much better name, as of course I am proud to be a lygon – whereas dragons, as far as I can tell, have a more passive attitude to their group and are more interested in watching what is going on in the world beyond. Anyway, the Indigos reside on an island in Hever Lake in the middle of the Kirkwood Mountains. The lake is the source of the Loncess River, and our cousins the Mountain Pride lygons live below it in the picturesque foothills.

By paying tribute to this wise ruler, I seek to absorb some of his charisma and organisational prowess into my own person. I must think carefully how best to portray him – what pose would convey his great power? In what surroundings should he be? A formal portrait? Or a more intimate one of him working at his desk? So much to think about . . . What a most enjoyable way to spend my time while I await the return of Councillor Kebreana.

CHAPTER 2



Tyjepp, Elder of the Brycthns, gripped his wife's hand tightly while they walked along the beach of Shoal Bay. The water had gradually receded and now resembled an unusually high tide. He looked down and wriggled his toes in the glistening salt-sands. He could still feel the tremors resonating around the island; such a great event would take a long time to settle.

It had happened so early in the morning that most of them were still asleep when the wall of thick water had pushed through the myrid, oozing into every crevice, dislodging nearly everything in its path. There had been warning shouts, and a race for mothers to lift children into trees, or climb with babies clinging on.

Only a few large trees and buildings made of stone had withstood the force; anything constructed of timber – huts, cooking areas, extra sleeping or storage quarters – had all crumpled and been carried away. That was what had caused the deaths and injuries. That, or people swept against rocks, and caught where they could not climb.

The water had mostly flowed away now, except for pools of it lying in hollowed areas and storage cellars. The men were searching through the woods to rescue anyone still trapped, to find bodies, to account for loved ones. Most of the women and older children were retrieving possessions that had been carried away and left scattered amongst the trees. Some were tending the frightened young ones.

Tyjepp, and his wife Keffyl, had taken a moment alone to calm themselves and think what needed to be done. Dead fish were already floating in the shallows and washing up on the beach; their white-clouded eyes staring, pale bellies offered unnaturally to the sun, mouths gaping with the shock of the blast that hit them. He called out to a couple of his men, who were standing on the beach, staring at the change that had been wrought to their bay that morning.

'The fish will be edible if we collect them now. We need to get them salted and hung to dry quickly, before they fester in the sun. Call some of the men to wade out and get them, and tell the women to prepare all the preserving barrels that are still intact.' Then, quietly he said to Keffyl, 'It is hard to know what might have survived, or how long the bay will take to recover – I doubt we'll be fishing again for a while.'

Keffyl was still staring at the jagged circle of rocks that had suddenly risen like a forbidding crown in the centre of their beautiful bay. 'Those rocks are hideous,' she said, with tears streaking her cheeks. 'Tyjepp, my love, what have we done to deserve this from the Ai-alyn?'

'Keffyl, my love, I have no idea. We have had nothing but troubles the last three sun-cycles – and yet, as always, our tributes have been made, our prayers have been said. I have watched people when they weren't aware, and listened to the rumours. So have you. I am none the wiser as to what we might have done to deserve such displeasure.'

'I know some like to blame my sister,' said Keffyl. 'I know she can be blunt, and she upset a few people with that joke of hers, but in her heart she's not disrespectful.'

'Your sister's comment was made in jest, and after our troubles began. So it is hard to see why it would be due to her – perhaps she's being used as a foil for someone?'

Keffyl shrugged and put her head in her hands. 'Do you think,' she said, looking up through her fingers, 'there is any chance that it might be nothing to do with our myrid at all, but instead something that the Aai have done?'

‘I have wondered,’ said Tyjepp, putting his arm around her shoulders, ‘but Gam and I have always worked well together – you know that – and our myrids live peacefully. We each have our allotted tasks, we support each other, and he takes his duties to the Ai-alyn as seriously as I do. They’ve been beset by the same troubles as us the last few sun-cycles. But who knows? Perhaps you’re right and someone in his myrid has offended, causing us all to suffer.

‘We’ve so much else to worry about, though. We still have to account for everyone and patch up our homes. Let’s just get things in order, grieve for our dead, and pray to the Ai-alyn for an understanding of these events before we approach the Aai with our concerns.’

In a sheltered valley on the other side of the mountains, Gam, Chief of the Aai, was sitting on the edge of his bed, cradling his injured arm while the Healer applied a salve with numbing herbs that would dull the feeling for a time. His younger son, Hal, stood by the fire, waiting to assist.

‘Argh. By the Ai-alyn, be gentle would you! Or I’ll vomit from the pain. And hurry. I have so much to do – and you have many others to treat as well.’

‘I can’t be fast *and* gentle at the same time. Your forearm is swollen and I need to check if it is broken,’ the Healer said patiently.

‘Hurry up! It hurts! Can’t you make that useless salve of yours any stronger?’

‘No, I can’t. I think you have been lucky and the bone is only cracked, not broken.’

‘Good. Now I can go?’

‘No. I will still need to set it properly. I can’t just patch you up and have you spend the rest of your life complaining that it aches, because then you won’t use it enough and it’ll end up wasting away.’

‘Yes, alright. You always know best. Perhaps you can tell me then, why we are again beset with troubles when all our tributes and prayers are in order? Why did the Ai-alyn decide to shake the earth, crash two huge lyntrees onto our myrid and injure me and so many others? What have any of us done to deserve their wrath?’

‘My Chief, you’ve asked me versions of that question many times now, and still I have no idea. When I have finished with you, and tended the other injured, I will pray. That is all I can do.’ The Healer turned to Hal. ‘Now, hold your father still while I brace and bandage his arm. Even with the numbing herbs it will not be pleasant.’

Gam drank a large mug of wine, then Hal held two straight, smooth sticks in place on either side of his father’s forearm while the Healer wrapped it in bandages smeared with a paste of ground seashell and egg-white. Gam sat rigidly staring at the ceiling, counting the nails in the beams out loud to distract himself from the pain. Occasionally he thumped the bed with his other hand and swore. When it was over he slumped against his younger son.

Hal bathed the sweat from his father’s face and then fetched a clean shirt. His father viewed it dubiously, wondering how much more pain it would give him to put it on.

The Healer smiled and said, ‘Now, you must sit by the fire until that has dried and feels stiff to touch. I will leave you a pot of numbing salve, as I am sure I would waste my breath if I gave you any advice to rest.’

‘True. Now go and help the others who need it. As soon as this is nearly dry I will be out to help.’

‘Father,’ said Hal, ‘What – or who – do *you* think has caused this? Our tributes have been made, our prayers said. Has someone in the myrid dishonoured the Ai-alyn?’

‘Not that I’m aware of. You know I have been watching for that.’

‘Is there someone who is perhaps not suitable for their role?’

‘That’s a strange thing to say – are you doubting my judgement?’

‘Oh, not at all Father,’ Hal replied hastily, ‘but you don’t appoint all the roles – some are conferred by birth.’

Gam understood what his son did not dare say directly and shot him a sharp warning look.

‘Or,’ said Hal, sensing he had stepped too far, ‘do you think it might be something that the Brycthns have done?’

‘The Brycthns? I doubt it. Tyjepp is a very conscientious Elder. He takes his duties to the Ai-alyn as seriously as I do. But who knows? Perhaps you are right. I can’t think of anyone in our myrid who would have caused this – perhaps someone in his myrid has offended?’

Jay, the Chief’s willowy elder son, suddenly burst into the hut, breathless and sodden with sweat from running. He hesitated when he saw his brother, then he knelt at his father’s feet, touched his head on the ground, and stretched his arms out in obeisance, ‘My Father, there is a rift in the salt-plain.’

‘A rift in the salt-plain? What do you mean?’ asked Gam.

Jay lifted his forehead from the ground, sat back on his knees, and said breathlessly, ‘Father, I was up there this morning, watching over the plain, as usual, when the birds, who sing at their loudest and most joyous at that time of day, were suddenly silent. Then all at once they took to the sky in a way I have never seen. All the birds, of every breed, flew together – the large falcaws and gishawks, in amongst the tiny seedpeckers, dewers, and salgulls – predators and prey alike, all headed in a swirling mass for Brack Island.

‘For a few moments everything was so still that the hair on my arms prickled, and I couldn’t breathe. Then the ground trembled, the trees began to sway, and old branches started falling from the trees. I ran out onto the salt-plain, thinking it might be safer out there. But the ground trembled so much that I could not stand, so I spread my cloak on the salt and lay down. In my heart I felt it happen.

‘It started as a weakness in the core rock that lies under the island – it fractured, and a dark substance much like thick blood forced its way up, the way blood will gush from a deep wound – up into Shoal Bay, where it congealed like jagged wound-crust.

‘The surging of it has cracked the island in many places, radiating out from the centre; as happens with a log when one drives an axe into it. And so, there is now a crack – a deep rift – in the salt-plain.’

Gam was silent for a moment while he thought. ‘By the Ai-alyn, Jay, you have confirmed my fear that the damage is widespread. Any changes to Shoal Bay will surely have hurt the Brycthns – I wonder how they are faring? . . . But I have no time for all this now. Two large lyntrees fell upon our myrid – one branch crashed through my roof and came down upon my bed. It was not a pleasant way to wake.’ Gam gestured with his bandaged arm.

‘Please forgive me, father. I did not notice.’ said Jay. ‘Are you badly wounded?’

‘Bad enough. It could have been much worse.’

‘Just as well,’ said Hal, ‘that I was here to lift the branch from off your bed, and fetch the Healer. I had it treated promptly and that will surely help your recovery,’ said Hal.

‘Yes, yes, Hal. You’ve looked after me well, and I’m grateful. Now – Jay, would you go to the Healer and see if he needs any help. Hal and I will gather the other men and see what can be done about removing the trees that have fallen.’ Gam stood up, and winced with pain. ‘I wonder if the Healer has some double strength salve?’

‘Father, the Healer knows you – he has already made it as strong as he dares,’ smiled Hal as he accompanied his father, and left Jay behind.

‘Why, by the Ai-alyn would I want to dive down out there?’ Pethyn demanded of Tyjepp.

‘Because we need to know the state of the seastring beds, and if the reef where the salfish breed is still intact – I would have thought that was obvious,’ he explained to his sister-in-law.

‘Yes, all that *is* obvious. I know that is *why* you want someone to dive there. I said why would *I* want to go diving down there? There are younger divers than me who could do it.’

‘Yes, but they are not as experienced. No one else has your knowledge of the bay-floor. No one else has your memory for how it has looked over the sun-cycles. No one else has your understanding of how the seastring and salfish shift their growth and breeding according to the conditions. You might be able to tell if there is any chance of recovery, so we could decide whether moving the myrid is temporary or permanent – because that makes a big difference to our planning. I would not trust anyone else’s judgement on the long-term effects of what has happened out there.’

‘Very flattering. But my question still stands. Why would I *want* to dive out there? I have no desire to do it as any sort of personal sacrifice to the myrid. Going anywhere near those rocks looks like a very bad idea – what is in it for me?’

‘I see. So that is the issue. I know you and your daughter have lost your home. How would you like a better one if we move or rebuild the myrid? I would provide you with good land, and have the men build you a stone house to your own design.’

Pethyn looked out across the bay for a few moments. She contemplated the dark circle of rocks. They were partly submerged by the high-tide, but still jagged and menacing in the calm, blue bay. ‘That is far more than I expected. In my heart I still don’t want to do this – in all fairness I can’t imagine that anyone would – but I’d be a fool to turn down an offer like that. I will dive at low-tide tomorrow.’

Teffer settled himself in his usual position beside the Royal Aidon’s chair in the Council Meeting Room, ready for their regular scheduled meeting, as opposed to the crisis meetings of the last couple of days. He wearily arranged his parchment, pens and inks, ready to take the minutes. The last few days, he felt that he had either been in this room taking minutes, in the manuscript room copying them out, or tending to distressed Councillors, and had barely had time to eat and sleep, let alone write his scribe-tale.

Teffer was bemused why anyone, now or in the future, would be interested in the disappointed rantings of Royal Aidon and his impatient dismissal of the explanations of his poor beleaguered Councillors, but Royal Aidon was a stickler for record keeping. He saw it as providing an important resource for future Royals that would enable them to learn from his excellent example.

Towards the end of her reign, Myrra had commissioned Teffer to compile a *Ruler’s Manual*. It seemed to him a rather useful document, with instructions and advice grouped under various topics – it sat on the Council table right in front of Royal Aidon, but he had always resolutely ignored its existence. Still, Teffer’s role was not to question the efficacy of Royal Aidon’s performance, he was merely a scribe. Actually he was Official Scribe to the Salt Pride Council, and so here he was, parchment spread flat, pen laden with ink, once again dutifully ready to begin.

Four of the five Councillors filed in. Teffer noticed that thanks to his care and dedication the previous evening, the scales of Councillors Wirron and Fintal did not show the loss of lustre that naturally came from despondency. The other two Councillors still looked dull and appeared not to care what Royal Aidon thought of their attitude, or perhaps paraded it a little in an attempt to make him feel sorry for them. Teffer suspected that either way the

effect was wasted, as Royal Aidon generally failed to notice much about his Councillors' appearance at all.

Royal Aidon then entered with a great flourish, grandly swished his tail, and took his seat at the head of the table. His scales were dull and had faded to a very pale mauve – he had obviously not been taking his lyntree nectar. Consuming one lozenge of crystallised nectar each day was an essential part of the diet of royal lygons. It imparted a deep purple sheen to the colour of their scales; it heightened the senses they used to perceive and monitor the energy balance of their territory; and it quickly restored any energy they expended while performing their royal duties. Even the extraordinarily conscientious Honour Royale Myrra admitted that lyntree nectar was abhorrently sweet with a bitter aftertaste, and regular consumption of the nectar lozenges was a royal duty in itself. It had long been known that it was a duty that Royal Aidon shirked as often as possible.

‘Where is our fifth Councillor?’ Royal Aidon demanded.

‘Councillor Kebreana was due back this morning. This morning, my Royal,’ answered Secretary Wirron, sitting stooped on his cushion, paws shaking a little, and with the exaggerated tremor of age that he put into his voice when speaking in Royal Aidon’s presence. ‘However we have not yet seen her.’

Just then, a large patch of air at the end of the Council meeting room wavered and took on a silver tinge. Suddenly, disconnected parts of a red lygon appeared at the end of the room. The cauta in question was lying on her side with her tail tangled through her legs, and patches of her scales scruffed backwards to show the dull, slightly mirrored side that reflected the surroundings. Inverting the scales to show the mirrored side could be used, at will, as a camouflage. However, in this case it gave the undignified impression that only bits of her were there. No one dared to laugh.

The air was still silver and shimmering behind her as she heaved herself to her feet and smoothed her scales into place. She took an imposing stance, and breathed heavily for the few moments it took for her to settle into the room.

‘What, by Salt, has been going on in my absence?’ she demanded. ‘The lyg-lines are all out of alignment. I attempted to return this morning – in plenty of time for our meeting as I had promised – but the main route over the Solace Sea is fractured, so I took a longer way and even then I ended up on Brack Island instead! It took me some time to navigate here, as the lyg-lines around the island are particularly broken and contorted, and don’t lead at all where you would expect. Travelling has been quite a horror. What, by Salt, has happened?’

Teffer smiled at the thought of Councillor Kebreana’s considerable form popping up unexpectedly in random locations around the Salt Islands. As the meeting had not officially started, he declined to record her tirade. *She’s back*, he sent a thought message to Zebber. *Oh. Great*, came Zebber’s reply.

‘My dear Councillor Kebreana,’ Royal Aidon intoned in a manner that was presumably meant to be soothing, but had a panicky edge to it; as with a young boy caught trying to make up a story to prove his innocence. ‘In your absence there has indeed been, what shall we call it? An unexpected turn of events? I instructed the Councillors to make my islet, but they have failed me. I presume your problems with the lyg-lines are a result of that.’

‘Make your islet? In my absence!’ She glared accusingly at the other Councillors, who avidly talked to each other, or doodled with their claws on the well-worn surface of the table, and thus all carefully avoided meeting her eyes. Aidon breathed an inner sigh of relief that she had taken his cue to blame them, and not pursued the obvious point that the direction must have come from himself.

‘Show me, my Royal, what has happened?’

‘Here, Councillor Kebreana, come to the window, and you will see what now exists out in Shoal Bay. Certainly not the islet I had in mind, but perhaps a start, perhaps a foundation

of something better to come. And may I say,' he smiled at her, as they walked to the window, 'that your sojourn in your home-lands appears to have been beneficial for you – you have put on condition while you were away.'

She has 'put on condition', and so will need to grow her whiskers even longer now, Teffer thought-sent to Zebber. *O dear – thank Salt she doesn't fit through our doorways,* Zebber replied with a laugh.

'Why, I am flattered that you have noticed.' She widened her pupils and made her eyes appealingly dark. She reached the window, looked down at Shoal Bay, and was obviously shocked.

She was silent for a moment, then said with a carefully controlled mix of grief and outrage, 'My Royal! Oh, my Royal! How has this been allowed to happen? If only you had waited for my return!' She took his paw in both of hers, made her eyes even darker, and her scales gleam. 'So remiss of you, my dearest Royal. You know I would have made sure you had exactly what you wanted. You know how I understand your needs. I would have made sure that you had just the most perfect islet for your retreat. I know how important it is for you to have somewhere to go and rest from your onerous duties, and regain your energy. All the demands that are endlessly made on you! And this is what they gave you? My dear Royal, why didn't you wait for me?'

'Dear Councillor Kebreana, I am so glad that you have returned,' smiled the Royal Aidon.

'This must be fixed!' Kebreana demanded of the other Councillors who stared at her silently as she turned and left the room, pausing only to rub her scent on the door-frame.

Close to word-perfect, Teffer thought-sent to Zebber. *Ha!* came the reply.

At dinner Aidon was sullen and did not participate in the general conversation. He picked the pastry rim off a sloam pie and fished out the berries that were floating in his wine. He arranged the berries and pieces of pastry in elaborate floral patterns on the table. The others were used to him behaving like this, and took it as a sign that he was preoccupied with his own thoughts and best left alone.

Her return earlier in the day had made him think about Kebreana, which surprised him, as he did not often think of her. Usually she was just *there* and did not require thinking about at all – in fact ever since she had arrived on the island, she seemed to have taken it on as her role to think about *him*, and his needs, and his general looking-after. Usually it was most pleasant. She had soothed many troubles from his difficult existence.

She had trained the geflars to cook and cater for him in a way that better met his needs. They had been used to the set times of Myrra's well-ordered existence, and as a new Royal he had fallen into this routine, as everyone had seemed to expect that he would. Kebreana had noticed how frustrated he became when he was right in the middle of painting, or choosing threads for the next section of some woven hanging or a tapestry, and then would have to break away from it for a meal, or a meeting. By the time he returned he had lost his inspiration, and then the work never seemed to recover or turn out the way he had intended, so she had ordered the geflars to provide constant platters of food in his rooms to enable him to snack or make a hearty repast as he desired.

She had also encouraged him to change the time of Council meetings. Myrra had continued the tradition of every Royal, or Royale, prior to herself, and always had a brief meeting every three days. They were held first thing in the morning, straight after she had balanced the island, so that she could report on any findings. Then they had left to have breakfast and get on with their allotted tasks. Aidon was never awake in time, and simply could not manage to balance the island before consuming a substantial breakfast, so often the

meetings did not occur until well into the day – and the Councillors had sat around fidgeting and becoming increasingly disgruntled.

As soon as she had been made a Councillor, Kebreana persuaded him to formally change the meeting time to the early evening. This was the time when Aidon tended to be least artistically productive, was rested from his afternoon nap, and could reward himself after the meeting with a hearty dinner. The Councillors were appalled that Aidon would change an arrangement that had worked well for the pride for hundreds of sun-cycles, but offered little resistance as they could not bear to waste another morning sitting around waiting for that unpredictable moment when the Royal might decide to rise from his cushion.

There were many, many other things that Kebreana had done behind the scenes to smooth the way for the full expression of his artistic talent and administrative prowess, and Aidon had barely noticed any of them individually, only that in general his life seemed easier now.

Then Kebreana had suddenly gone away for a while – to visit her family, she had said – and he realised that he had hardly noticed her absence at all.

She had left the geflars with strict instructions, which generally they had followed, and the Councillors were now used to his ways; so for most of the time it made little difference whether she was there or not. In fact, Aidon admitted to himself, there were ways in which her absence was a relief. He felt more relaxed when he had been relieved of her intensely watchful presence. He had not realised how pressured he felt by her constant queries regarding his wishes and well-being. Without her hovering in the background like a benevolent guard, monitoring his progress and tending to his needs, he found he could focus more on his creative endeavours. He certainly valued the initial input she had made – but now everything ran so smoothly without her. Kebreana would be horrified to know that she had made herself redundant.

But now she had returned, and he'd had to explain what had happened with his islet. He felt, as he had feared, that she was angry with him for doing it while she was away – and this annoyed him. It indicated to him that she was developing some sense of entitlement – to exactly what he was not sure, but certainly to something. She was a Councillor, and so it was not for her to judge his behaviour, only to obey his wishes. The fact that he had needed to find a way to deflect her anger away from himself and on to the other Councillors made him feel profoundly resentful. It was almost as though she was presuming a greater role in his life – almost as though she was presuming the role of . . . consort?

The thought came to him as a shock, and he angrily brushed all his berries and bits of pastry on to the floor. He stormed out of the dining hall and out into the garden. The other lygons watched him leave in silence. They were used to his moody outbursts, and there was no doubt that they were all feeling stressed at the moment.

But that is preposterous! he thought as he stomped down one of the garden paths to a cleared area that unfortunately afforded glimpses of Shoal Bay between the trees. *The last thing I intend to do is take a consort. And if I ever did – which I won't – then Kebreana would be the last cauta on my list. She is not of sufficient rank, and in any case, she is far too much like my mother. She is everything I don't want more of in my life – she is bossy, overbearing and unpredictable. She is wonderful to have as a Councillor looking after my interests, and it has been very pleasant having her attend to my needs – as indeed she should – as indeed should all my Councillors. But the thought of her being anything else is . . . is . . . anyway, why should I be anxious about how she feels? It just shows how stressed I am that I am worrying about things that I should not have to waste time and energy worrying about. It is her role to save me from concerns, not to create them. She has no right to be angry with me whatever I do.*

Bella was arranging the cushions in Kebreana's room, ready for her return when the door was suddenly thrown open so hard it banged against the wall. 'What are you still doing here? Get out!' Kebreana snapped. 'The last thing I need is stupid little geflars hanging around.'

'My apologies, Councillor Kebreana. You must have had a tiring journey. Would you like some refreshments?'

'What? Oh, yes. Get me some wine and adoration cakes – some of the big ones – lots of them – not those tiny things you send down to myrid people – and I want them piled high with jewelberry jam and verapin cream.'

Bella nodded and hurriedly jumped through the fire; but instead of running down to the kitchen, she paused in the passage that ran past the back of the fireplace at a spot where she could observe Kebreana. *That is excessively grumpy even for her*, Bella thought. She watched as Kebreana stormed over to the window, looked out at the rocks in Shoal Bay, and burst into tears. Kebreana held on to the window-sill with her head on her paws while she howled and keened. 'My wonderful idea all ruined. You and I would have lived there together and been so happy . . . I know it would have taken time, but without all the distractions of this place, on our own together, darling Aidon, you would have realised . . . Why did you try and do it without me? Because now you think it was all your idea and want to cut me out. Is that it? If so serve you right that it all went wrong . . . Or were you doing it as a surprise for my return because you care? Surely that must be it.' Kebreana paused and lifted her head, she took a couple of deep breaths and gave a fragile smile. Then carried on muttering to herself, 'Surely he must have been doing it as a gift for me because he cares . . . but if he cares why won't he take his lyntree lozenges?'

'Oh, this is so unfair! I made all the effort to go home only to have my uncle maliciously undermine my best intentions, and I've come back here to a disaster. All my plans . . . this is really so unfair . . . there must be something I can do . . . there must be something . . .

'Surely if I stay by his side and solve this he will realise how much he needs me?' With that thought Kebreana brushed the tears from her face with the back of her paws and sharpened her claws on the window-sill in a very determined manner.

Bella quietly turned and ran to the kitchen, thinking up excuses to make if Kebreana complained she had taken too long.

Wirron and Fintal were once again curled up on the cushions in Wirron's room discussing the day over a welcome repast of wine, water and roast meats.

'That cauta is utterly insufferable,' said Fintal, selecting a slice of marloo that appeared to be free of bones. 'It was so gratifying to see her arrive in such an undignified manner. Trying to create the islet while she was away was definitely the best thing to do – despite her assertions to the contrary. At least there was some harmony in our group when we made the attempt. It doesn't bear thinking how much worse the outcome might have been if she was there trying to boss us around, pretending she knew best and desperate to take all the credit for it.'

'But then maybe,' said Wirron, 'perhaps if she had been, if she had been there, the whole effort would have collapsed much earlier and nothing would have happened at all. Perhaps nothing would have happened. It might actually have been a better outcome. She would have blamed us entirely. I am sure she would have blamed us entirely – but we certainly couldn't be blamed more than we are now. For we could not be blamed more than we are now.'

'I hadn't considered that – what an uncomfortable thought. Are you trying to say that our dedication and effectiveness actually made the outcome worse?' asked Fintal.

Wirron nodded. 'Only because, as we knew all along, what we were being asked to do was a travesty. A travesty.'

'But everything he wants is a travesty,' said Fintal, 'because it is all about indulging whatever selfish whim is his current obsession. How are we ever going to resolve the issue of the succession? That involves all the elements of planning and responsibility that he avoids as if they were dragon-turds.'

'Yes, it is an issue that he refuses to discuss,' agreed Wirron. 'Just refuses to discuss. You've seen what happens when I raise the matter at Council meetings – he just laughs and says he is still young and has only been reigning for three sun-cycles so there is plenty of time before he needs to even think about it. Plenty of time. And we all sit there silently wondering how we will ever get any suitable royale to agree to mate with him. To mate with *him*?'

'All of us except Kebreana,' Fintal said with a laugh, 'despite the fact that she is totally unsuited to the role and has no chance at all, she is sitting there thinking something quite different. She goes all quiet and flirtatious. She deepens her eyes and arches her back in a most unseemly manner, and he hardly notices at all.'

'Don't remind me. It is a most unappealing sight. Most unappealing.'

Fintal mused, 'And now she is back from her sojourn – whatever that was about with its vague explanations and rushed departure – and behaving worse than ever. She has taken it upon herself to comfort him in his hour of distress. How does she maintain her delusion that he is interested in her when everyone else can see how the land lies with him?'

'He plays along with her to some extent, so he must be getting something out of the arrangement – something. Only Salt knows what that might be? Perhaps he just finds the attention flattering?' said Wirron.

'Nonetheless she reads far too much in to it, and it only encourages her inflated sense of her own importance. It makes her domination of Council meetings intolerable,' groaned Fintal.

'Ah!' smiled Wirron, 'Now that is an issue I can do something about. Indeed I can. I have worked it all out.'

'Really? What's that?' Fintal said sceptically.

'Here is my plan,' said Wirron. 'I am going to resign my position as Secretary over this debacle and you are going to nominate her to take my place. We will make sure the Council votes her in unanimously as the new Secretary.'

Fintal leapt up with his back arched and spluttered his mouthful of water. His claws ripped small tears in the cushion, and his water bowl rolled across the hearth, but he didn't notice. 'What?!' he hissed. 'But that's outrageous! *I* was going to take your position when you retire! We had agreed on that! *She* is utterly and totally incompetent!'

'Exactly.'

'What do you mean "*Exactly*"? You want to give her a promotion *because* she is incompetent? That doesn't make any sense. Perhaps, with the greatest respect, your age has finally affected your judgement? Have I served you loyally all these sun-cycles only to be repaid with *this*? And if, Salt forbid, she does end up as Secretary, when you and Myrra are no longer here, which is not so far away – where does that leave me? Where does it leave all the rest of us?'

CHAPTER 3



Lydia slipped quietly out of bed, and dressed in the soft glow of early sunlight that filtered through her thin curtains. She did not want to draw them back in case the whispery sound of it alerted her parents who were asleep, or perhaps slowly waking, in the next room. Just yesterday they had forced her to move from her lovely room at the front of the house to this much smaller room, next to theirs, for the sole purpose of stifling her morning forays to the wharf.

She would not be stifled.

She wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and held her shoes in the same hand as she used to lift her skirts. She tip-toed down the stairs, carefully stepping over the third step from the bottom, as it creaked. Then, all in a few breathless moments, she was across the hall, out the kitchen door, down the side path and onto the road; where she put on her shoes at last, and was free.

It was going to be a fine, clear day. The air hung motionless, and laden with the heavy scent of the night-ivy that grew along the side of the road. The grass sparkled with dew and the road was still damp. In an hour or so the road would dry out and the dust would blow in her eyes and catch in her throat. But for now, just for a while, the world was perfect.

Thank the Ai-alyln, she thought, as she ran down the hill to the wharf, that the world outside her was perfect, for a moment, to make up for the fact that her inside world was not.

She used her shawl to brush a tear from the corner of her eyes as she remembered the argument with her parents last night. She did not want to move from her big, light, airy room at the front of the house where she could see out over the sea, to the small glum room at the back, next to theirs. Yes, they had put up curtains in her favourite shade of blue. Yes, it looked out over the garden and the hills at the back of the town, which was a perfectly pretty and acceptable view. Yes, she might sleep better as she would not be woken by the early traffic in the street on market day. Yes, yes, yes. But no. The room felt like a tomb, and she had dreamed the most dreadful dream last night to prove it.

She couldn't remember any details of the dream. Just some awful sense of danger, before something slammed into her and she woke.

She did not dream often. When she did she dared not tell anyone. None of the adults in the town ever spoke of dreams; they were seen to belong to little children as part of the Ai-alyln's way of teaching. They were seen as something you grew out of once you were old enough to go to school and help around the house. So when she did dream, she felt ashamed and never mentioned it.

But even worse than the shame of her occasional dreams was that sometimes, during the day, she would have strange pictures leap into her mind. Pictures that had nothing to do with who she was with, or what was going on. Pictures of strange animals and places that sometimes came with fading sounds, or half-sensed smells. No one else ever spoke of having day-pictures; and when she tried to tell people she sensed that they thought her odd. It displeased her father greatly to have people think that she was odd.

Worst of all was that sometimes she knew things that she had no explainable way of knowing. She would blurt these things out at the worst times, before she could stop herself. Like the time that her mother couldn't find her pearl brooch and she had said 'It's in Ellen's top drawer.' All she knew was that she suddenly had a picture in her mind of where the

brooch was. She did not know that her older sister had carefully hidden it there so that she could wear it to a secret meeting with her lover. Her sister accused her of eavesdropping, rifling through her room, betrayal, and many other unpleasant things; and her parents, although grateful to have regained the brooch and thwarted their elder daughter's escapades, had lectured her on the dubious morality of telling tales.

She realised it would have been much better to have kept silent, secretly retrieved the brooch, and left it where her mother would find it. But these facts just jumped out of her mouth of their own accord. There seemed to be nothing she could do to stop them.

Her father was the Magistrate in Lorne; a busy port town at the mouth of the Loncess River. He was very important, and wealthy, and lived in an imposing house in the middle of town. He cared very much what people thought of him, his wife and two daughters, his house and smart carriage. He did not appreciate having a daughter who was impolite and behaved improperly – a daughter who loved to sit on the edge of the wharf to watch the sun rise, while she swung her legs over the water as it lapped around the pylons. A daughter who smuggled bread out of the house to feed the gulls, and who chatted to the “rough and dangerous” fishermen as they unloaded their night's catch; and who waved to the equally dubious merchants' runners as they brought in the cargo from the big ships moored out in the estuary. Her love of hanging around the wharf made her father very angry.

She reached the wharf and ran to towards her favourite spot. She always liked to sit leaning against a bollard – the one just across the walkway from the Trader's Office – where she could see the busy skiffs rowing between the ships and the wharf, and listen to the sailors and fishermen calling out to each other.

She so needed just a few minutes of peaceful time to herself. She sat down and dangled her legs over the edge of the pier, shut her eyes, and listened. In between the creaking of boats, the squawking of gulls waiting for scraps, and the shouting of busy men, she could hear the water lapping against the pylons. Further back, under the pier, she could also hear it lapping against the stone wall. The sun was warm on her face, and she dozed lightly for a moment. Then the same feeling from her dream – danger, loss, something slammed into her. She startled awake.

She had linked the dream with the turmoil in her home; arguing with her parents and her horrid new room. She had risked more arguments to visit the wharf against their orders, just to feel safe and happy again for a while. It wasn't fair that the dream had followed her here.

She looked around at the boats. For some reason there were hardly any in this morning. A gnarled old sailor known as Pepper tied his skiff up to a bollard not far from her and began off-loading crates of persefruit that had come from a fine looking ship called the *Integrity*. It had just arrived from further south and was moored out in the estuary.

In a modest house a few streets back from the docks, Anne put on the same sensible gown that she always did. It was all very well to spend her life making finery for the ladies of the town, but she could not, in all honesty, imagine having to decide – every single morning – which of a dozen or more different dresses to wear. So, even though she actually owned three gowns (one on, one off, and one to-be-washed), they were all identical, and in beige twill. She had chosen the shade with particular care so that it did not show the dust from the streets. This meant she could arrive at the fine houses – to measure the ladies for their dresses, or to make deliveries – still looking quite presentable, even though she had walked all the way.

This morning she enjoyed her walk down to the wharf in the sunshine. She needed to collect the bolt of green silk that had been ordered by Mrs Neville, the Magistrate's wife, to

make a new ball-gown. It had come in on the ship yesterday – Mr Thorogoode had sent her a note to let her know.

The wharf seemed unusually quiet. There were not as many fishing vessels in as usual. From overheard snatches of conversation she gathered that no one had caught any fish that night. Some boats had decided to stay out and move to a new area, some boats had returned so the crew could rest and get more supplies.

Still, a few skiffs were being rowed between the wharf and the big ships anchored at the mouth of the river. There was the Police Inspector talking to a couple of the fishermen – she wondered what they had done – and there was the Magistrate's daughter, Ellen, no Lydia – the younger one. She was always hanging around here, chatting to the fishermen, who were fatherly and protective of her. But she's growing up – hardly an appropriate place for a young lady. Everyone knew her father disapproved.

Anne reached the door to the Trader's Office at the same time as a rather muscular, bearded gentleman, who smiled warmly as he held the door open for her.

'Oh, why thank you,' she blushed, finding him rather attractive, and aware that Mr Thorogoode was watching with disapproval.

'Good Morning, Sir,' Thorogoode said too politely, as he darted out from behind his desk. 'I shall just attend to the lady's needs first, and then I shall be with you . . . my dear lady, Anne,' and he took her by the arm and led her to the counter at the other side of the shop. Hindle, his assistant, was there tallying some figures. Thorogoode brushed him aside, so Hindle moved further down the counter and carried on.

'Here is your bolt of shot-silk. It is quite exquisite, but of course not nearly as exquisite as yourself . . . if I may be so bold as to say so?' he added when he noticed the bemused look on her face. Anne looked intently at the package. 'At any rate,' he carried on, 'I am sure that with this beautiful cloth, and your incomparable skills as a seamstress, Mrs Neville will be the envy of the town at the Autumn Ball.'

He unwrapped the plain calico package to reveal the most beautiful piece of forest green silk, shot with lighter shades of emerald. He carefully ruffled a corner of the cloth, turning it in the light so that the play of colours was shown at its best. It looked at once like a soft mossy bank, or leaves rustling in the breeze.

'It is beautiful. Mr Thorogoode, I am sure Mrs Neville will be most pleased,' said Anne politely. 'I shall have to be very careful. Because of the considerable cost of shot-silk, and what with the new taxes, she has bought only just enough for me to make the dress that she has chosen. There is no extra to spare if I make a mistake in my cutting.'

'I have never heard of you making a mistake, or of any of the ladies being other than delighted with your work. I shall charge this to Mrs Neville's account, and send her a note to say that you have collected it,' he said as he re-wrapped the cloth in its calico cover, and tied the parcel with string.

She held it carefully against her chest with both her arms, and exclaimed with pleasure, 'Oh, but it smells so delightfully of persefruit!'

'Ahm, yes, well, all manner of things come in on the merchant ships.' Then, very quietly, he added, 'There will be a market in the Town Square next Round Moon – may I escort you?'

She nodded imperceptibly. Thorogoode guided her to the door, brushing past the gentleman who, all this time, had been waiting patiently by Thorogoode's desk. Just as Thorogoode opened the door for Anne to leave, the water in the harbour suddenly rose up, and up, until it spilled over the top of the wharf. A small wave of it ran across the wooden walkway and caught at their feet. It washed a small way into the Trader's Office, then just as suddenly, it washed away.

CHAPTER 4 (Excerpt)

. . .

Aidon made his way to the dining room and ordered Bella to drag a large cushion into the middle of the floor near the end wall, and plump it up for his comfort. When he had settled he ordered a large platter of tasty snacks and some of the best birrnberry wine. While he was waiting for Bella to bring them he proudly perused the wall and the rough outline he had sketched, entirely by himself. He had not particularly enjoyed the taste of the charcoal stick between his teeth, but he had not trusted a geflar to adequately render his vision of the grandeur and size of the image. He was quite entranced as he imagined the intensity and subtle variations of colour, and the remarkable accuracy of the finest detail that he would render. It would be a dragon portrait like no other. He thought in passing that he had never seen, or even heard of another dragon portrait . . . *then mine shall certainly be the best* . . .

Bella returned with a large tray of food and drink that she set down on the floor before him. ‘Now, geflar,’ he said in his usual imperious voice, ‘see the wonderful outline I have drawn on the wall?’

Bella looked at the small lopsided oval with a couple of dark circles inside it, and the large lopsided oval that dragged off the side of it; she had been wondering if it was an oversized maggot, or perhaps a verapin without legs. She smiled politely, ‘Yes, my Royal?’

‘I found it most tiring the other day, having to stretch up to put my creative marks that high on the wall, and then to walk back here to admire them and determine if they need any fine adjustments. So, today I will just stay here and you can follow my instructions.’

‘Yes, my Royal.’ *Salt, salt, salt*, thought Bella in annoyance, there were many other things she would rather be doing with her afternoon, but now it looked like the Saltgrinder was going to keep her occupied on his silly portrait, and she knew this task would go on . . . and on . . . She sighed to herself.

Are you alright? What’s he done to you now? Teffer thought to her.

Yes I’m alright – just the usual tedious time-consuming demands. He wants me to do his artwork for him again.

Oh. So it’s your turn now. He got me to do that portrait of his mother – and he changed the colour of her cushion five times. Didn’t you do the landscape of the proposed islet?

Yes – I only finished that a few days ago.

It looks great. You are such a fine painter. What a pity the islet doesn’t actually look like that!

That’s so funny. Anyway, I’d better pay attention, I’ve just missed what he’s asking me to do . . .

‘Don’t stand there looking blankly at me like that! You geflars are so slow and stupid! I said I want you to fine-tune my outline of Isparag.’

Isparag! Bella instantly shielded her thoughts and feelings from the other geflars. They would panic if they knew, and that would cause so much disruption in the Felicitate. Aidon would be angry, and she would bear the brunt of it. No, better to think carefully how to handle this.

‘I want you to – to start with his crest,’ Aidon continued, oblivious to the horrified look on Bella’s face. ‘Now, you used to have the immense good fortune to live with him, so you will know exactly how he looks. This is fortunate for the accuracy of my portrait – as I have never actually seen him. So . . . his crest . . . please sketch it in as you remember.’

Bella took a stick of charcoal, flew up to the top of the small oval and hovered there while she drew. She knew exactly what Isparag’s crest looked like, as she had seen it up far

too close when he had leered at her with angry eyes, and she had feared she might be eaten. It was a single crest, straight, and like everything else about Isparag, very sparse and plain. She drew the most beautiful double crest with intricate fluting and a multitude of spikes.

‘Ah! Wonderful!’ exclaimed Aidon. ‘I have made the most admirable start to my portrait. Now. His eyes. Remember that the eyes express the true nature of the beast – so take great care to get his eyes just right.’

Bella remembered only too well Isparag’s hard and uncaring nature, and that his eyes were small and recessed with heavily scaled lids. She drew large, kind eyes with fine scales and thick lashes. And so she continued. Isparag was scrawny and stooped from working at his desk, so she drew a robust dragon with strong legs and powerful wings. Isparag had a long, miserly face so she drew her dragon’s face high-browed and noble . . .

‘Now that I see before me the beauty and grace of this amazing dragon it is no wonder that he is my idol,’ Aidon glowed with pleasure, and a surfeit of birrnberry wine. Everyone who sees this portrait will be so impressed with my talent and my ability to render not only an accurate likeness of form – but to express his very spirit. A most productive session on my portrait, indeed.’

Deep in his dragon sleep Mithia felt the shift. Far out on the edge of his awareness something changed – as though on the hazy periphery of some vast jigsaw of the world, a tiny piece slotted into place, and an island appeared. He noted this with a bemused twitch of the corner of his mouth, and returned to sleep.

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CHAPTER 10 (Excerpt)

...

The moon still shone through the branches of the trees and cast mottled patterns, like lace, around the edges of the smooth expanse of the salt-plain; now pale blue and sparking in the soft light. The birnols still made their soft trilling calls to each other as they flew between the trees. The fat sloams still rustled in the branches, munching on lyntree leaves, and the little marloos scampered through the grass after night-insects. It all seemed the same.

But it wasn’t. Jay had spent nearly every night of the last fifteen sun-cycles here, only staying in the myrid when there was a festival, or he was ill. He knew it wasn’t the same. The shadows were darker. The animals were more restless. The salt did not glisten as brightly in the moon-light as it had before.

The rift was still there. There was that acrid smell like burnt lyntree leaves. As he neared the area that he had indicated to his father, he felt the normal, supportive energy of the ground give way beneath his feet. It felt as though he was walking in the air across a dark pit. It was terrifying – this feeling that, at any moment, he would plummet into an abyss. He broke out into a sweat, his legs trembled, and he held his hand on his heart to brace himself as he slowly moved forward.

But they were right, the surface of the ground remained the same – there were the footprints of his father and his brother, clearly trodden in the salt-crust. They had circled around each other, they had scruffed the ground with their heels, they had wandered back and forth.

Jay could not bear to look at their casual footprints any longer. He grabbed his cloak tightly around him, and raced back to where the ground seemed safe.

He sat up against a tree with his arms around his knees and his head back, gasping for air. How had they not felt that? The rift was overpowering. He didn't understand; either they had felt it and had decided for some reason to pretend they hadn't, or they had really not felt it at all. Both options left him bemused. But either way, they were now back in the myrid telling everyone that he was deluded.

The more he calmed down, the more despondent he felt, and the less he understood what was going on. He picked up a small twig and drew spiralling patterns in the fine salt-sand.

He had moments of feeling too ashamed to return to the myrid, and moments of angrily not caring if he never saw his family again. He had moments of desperately praying to the Ai-alyn for help, and moments of feeling abandoned by them. He wondered, yet again, about the cause of all their troubles the last few sun-cycles. Hal's revelation that he had killed here disturbed him. When, and how often had that happened? Was it the cause of those occasional evenings when he had turned up, found the animals unnaturally quiet and thought perhaps it was just because a gishawk had been circling around? Perhaps the gishawk had been attracted by his brother's kill – that would make sense. And the Ai-alyn were angry with the myrid because their sacred place had been violated by Hal? If that were so, it would be a truth his father would not want to hear.

He was starting to ache from the cold, and thought it was time he headed back to stoke his fire – it was probably nearly out by now, and rather foolishly he had taken hardly any benefit from it at all.

Nearby a female marloo was catching moths for her young. He did not want to disturb her, so he waited for her to return to her burrow before he got up and moved. As he watched her, he thought he saw the air in the centre of the salt-plain shimmer.

At first he thought he was imagining it. He was so tired and upset, it was probably just the tears in his eyes, or the breeze. Except there was no breeze that he could feel. He looked more intently, and yes, he was certain that a great patch of air, far out on the plain, shimmered. As soon as he felt certain of it – it stopped. Now there was an area where the trunks of the trees were blurred and indistinct – and this patch moved. It moved slowly, just a little way, then stopped.

He could feel her rather than see her.

An immense and wise presence.

A gentle sadness.

It was strange how he knew her to be female, could make out where she was, but not see her. In all the sun-cycles that he had watched over the salt-plain, he had never experienced this.

He sensed her move away from the line of the rift, then stop. The sadness emanating from her intensified. He sat very still.

She stayed some time until the moon was low on the horizon, and the shadows were all blurring into the same dull grey, then the air shimmered again, and she was gone.

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EXCERPTS FROM
LYGON ISLAND – THE UNDERSEA

CHAPTER 5 (Excerpt)

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‘Shhh!’ Fintal interrupted, ‘Can you feel that? Shh – everyone – can you feel that?’

They all froze, as they could indeed feel what Fintal meant. Coming silently up through the ground was the tearing energy of life-force leaving a body. A strong life-force leaving a very large body.

Lygons are predators; they know how it feels when they have their prey in a death-grip and shake the life-force from it. The strings of memories and unfulfilled wishes desperately cling to a body that is damaged beyond functioning; and the spirit, desperate to move on, rips them away. The energy of this struggle tears through the lygon’s nerves causing a momentary pain. The bigger the animal, the stronger the pain. It is the price that has to be paid; but once it is over there is a juicy, nourishing carcass for the lygons, and a spirit free to find a new form.

This was exactly that feeling. On a grand scale. But there was silence in the forest and no large creature to be seen. They all looked down at the ground, for that seemed to be the source of it. The ground was still and unremarkable.

...

CHAPTER 6 (Excerpt)

...

The sand and crystals crunched under her feet, so she had to place her feet down very slowly to avoid making much noise, and she realised it was better to take slow, deep breaths than to hold her breath and risk gasping. She trod her way carefully over to the first column of rock and, hugging onto its smooth surface, she edged her way around to get her first clear view of where they were.

Her hopes were instantly dashed. They were not in a sea-cave at all. This cavern stretched on for ever. She was at the back of a wide beach that edged what looked to be more like an endless still lake than a restless sea, and the regular columns of rock that supported the ceiling of the cave went on as far as she could see out over the lake. Behind her, the sandy floor of the cavern, interspersed in the same way by rock columns, also stretched flat and as far as she could see.

She finally realised where the light was coming from. Widely spaced across the floor of the cavern were patches of dim purple light, and from what she could make out, they seemed to continue under the water as well. It was hard to tell from the ground, but she sensed they formed some sort of pattern. The creature must have fallen asleep on the one nearest them, which would explain why the light had dimmed. *But surely it would have gone dark suddenly as it sat on it, not slowly like it did?* wondered Lydia, who shrugged aside the thought as it was an unpleasant reminder that she ought to find out what the creature was.

She made her way carefully to the next column of rock. Every few steps she paused to listen, but its rumbled breathing still sounded regular. This time she crouched down and crawled around the base of the rock column to make herself as small as possible. She could almost taste the stench of it; a mixture of stale salt, like rotting seaweed; and something almost metallic and a bit burnt, like an overheated cooking pot, or scorched ground after a fire. She pressed her fingers to her throat to stop herself from coughing, and looked up – and up.

It was huge. A pale, coiled worm with crusty skin, a round head too big for its body, slimy red tentacles oozing around the ears, and a great sucky mouth rimmed with spiky teeth.

Lydia's stomach heaved and she thought she might vomit with fear. She began to crawl backwards, very slowly. It opened one eye, and for a moment she stared into the fathomless black circle. It closed over with a lid that was crusty, red and seeping. Then it opened again and fixed on her.

It lifted its head and lunged towards her. She jumped behind the rock column as its head came down just where she had been crouching. For a moment she saw into its cavernous mouth full of crusty wounds; some of its teeth looked yellow and rancid, others were clear and sharp like crystals. Its breath was musty and metallic. She ran as it lifted its head and roared.

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CHAPTER 8 (Excerpt)

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Hal stopped for the second time, dropped his pack in the mud and sat down on a gnarled tree root. He folded his arms over his stomach and leaned forward. He thought he might vomit. Instead he sobbed. He was in so much pain, and he still had the steepest section of the track to go. He was grateful there was no one around to see him.

He winced at the memory of the last time he had come up here – with his father by his side and his pathetic brother Jay dragging behind them. Jay had concocted some ridiculous story about a crack in the salt-plain, and they had come up to denounce it for the lie that it was. He had been close to his father then. He had been the favoured son. He hadn't imagined then that there would ever be a rift between them, let alone that one so wide could open so fast.

He shivered in the dank air, and struggled to his feet. He would catch a chill if he sat moping around in the shade of the forest, wet with sweat from the climb. He didn't need to be ill as well as injured. *Though if I caught a chill and died who would care?* he sulked.

When he finally made it to the little Watcher's Hut on the edge of the salt-plain he was, as always, shocked at how small it was. Before, this had always amused him. He had smirked at the thought of his skinny, useless brother having to sleep up here on his own; while he stayed down in the myrid and filled his evenings with drinking and laughing.

When he entered it looked as sparse and tidy as it always had. That annoyed Hal. He flung his pack down on the bed and pulled all the contents out. He dumped his clothes on the floor and tossed his food onto the table in a cluttered mess. Even though it was a warm evening he built up a roaring fire with no thought to making the pile of chopped wood last. If it occurred to him for even a moment that it would be difficult for him to chop more wood with broken ribs he dismissed the thought.

Once the fire was going he went outside to relieve himself. He started to head for the area in the forest that his brother customarily used, but on a whim he turned back. He walked

around the hut and left his mark on each corner, in the way an animal would mark its territory.

He rummaged through the food he had bought with him and ate various things that didn't need any cooking: berries, dried meats, a couple of adoration cakes, half a round of soft verapin cheese, and bread that had been freshly baked that morning. He had drunk all the water he had with him, and couldn't be bothered making the trek to the nearby stream, so he went through all the bottles on the shelves in the hut, hoping his brother might have some wine stashed away. Most of them were empty, but had obviously been used for water. He found some sweet berry juice that he thought might be made from pressed jewelberries, and then he found a bottle of a dark liquid that smelt yeasty. Thinking it might be a sort of wine he took a swig, and then spat it out all over the floor. It was that disgusting tea the Healer was always brewing up.

Hal downed half the bottle of jewelberry juice to get the taste of the tonic out of his mouth, pulled off his clothes and crawled into bed. After lying there for a while he realised how much his ribs were hurting, and the cut above his eye was throbbing. He got up and looked for the jar of numbing-salve the Healer had given him. He couldn't find it. He rummaged through all his clothes again. And then again, this time throwing them around the room in frustration. He still couldn't find it. With a howl of anger he sat down on the bed, then instantly leapt up with an equivalent howl of pain, for he had sat down on the jar that had been covered by a fold of bedding. He threw the offending jar across the room as he rubbed the back of his thigh. Then, suddenly worried he might have broken the jar, he went over and picked it up.

The rim of the pottery jar was chipped, but otherwise, surprisingly, it was undamaged. When he prised out the cork, the smell of the ointment was earthy and comforting. Carefully, he scooped out a small amount to put on the gash above his eye and realised his hands were shaking. He looked at his broad, muscular hands trembling like those of a frightened woman and sobbed – deep, guttural sobs that ended with a howl. He smeared the ointment over his face and ribs, and then his thigh which he had just bruised, and crawled back into bed. Everything hurt – his body, his thoughts, his pride. There was no position to lie in, and no topic to think about that didn't cause him pain, so he curled up and sobbed himself to sleep.

...

CHAPTER 9 (Excerpt)

...

There was chaos and panic in the geflars' quarters.

'The dragon is in sight!' said Zebber.

Bella, who was curled up in her usual place near the kitchen fire, curled up into an even tighter ball and pulled one wing over her head. She felt so guilty she was beyond tears.

'What do we do?' they all wondered. They had missed their chance to run away.

'I wonder what gaze it is from?'

'Would it make any difference? Even if it isn't an Indigo they will soon find out.'

'Oh, by Salt! What do we do?'

And they were sitting in the kitchen, baking and eating slabs of bread spread with verapin butter for comfort, when a great wind blew through the Felicitate. The cooking pots hanging by the fire clanged against each other; the flour spread out on the table to stop the dough sticking was blown in a white cloud around the room; ashes from the fireplace blew around in a grey cloud that mingled with the flour; the scrolls rolled off the desk in the

manuscript room and a jar of brushes tipped over. Permeating the wind was the unmistakable smell of . . . dragon.

‘Wait here – I’ll go and have a look,’ said Zebber with a courage he did not feel. He made his way very quietly through the passage behind the fireplaces and stopped behind the one in the entrance hall. He stopped in the dark recesses behind the flames where he could not be seen, and the flames concealed his scent. Zebber watched as the Councillors flustered around the entrance hall until Royal Aidon came down the stairs and ushered them into some semblance of order behind him. Then the doors to the Felicitate were flung open and Aidon and the Councillors all trooped out to meet the dragon.

Zebber stared through the flames, transfixed with a mix of horror and fascination. Whatever he had been expecting to see, this was not it. This dragon was unlike any he had seen before – it was pale and shimmered in all sorts of pearly shades of pink, white and cream and it was surrounded by a hazy glow. *Bella’s dragon!* he thought, suddenly remembering the mural that Bella had been painting in the dining room. It was certainly like Bella’s dragon, but infinitely more noble and beautiful. He could not work out which gaze it might belong to. Albino dragons were rare, but even they had wings tinged with the colour of their gaze. This dragon was not from any recognisable gaze – it was a colour class all of its own. And it shimmered. Dragon scales would glint in the sunlight, and he had seen them look glossy on a healthy dragon – but shimmer? *No – never seen that before. I wonder if Bella saw this dragon in her mind when she painted, or has her painting created it?* Zebber had no idea.

The dragon snorted great flames directly at Aidon, and then into the air. *That’s a hostile greeting,* thought Zebber. *Are the lygons in as much danger as we are?*

. . .

CHAPTER 11 (Excerpt)

. . .

(Myrra) had had great difficulty traversing the rift on her last couple of visits. Mithia could see the damage in the lyg-lines that had given her so much trouble, for the energy of the line was still chaotic and torn, with some threads barely hanging on, and some trailing onto the salt-plain leaking energy. He could see that the crack in the ground was too far for a lygon to jump. This was not a problem for him – he simply flew.

With the three small boxes clasped to his chest he glided over the rift. As he passed over the rift he looked down, out of interest, to see how deep it was. What he saw shocked him so deeply he nearly faltered in his glide and had to beat his wings to regain speed. He landed heavily on the other side and nearly dropped the boxes.

He was aghast. His heartbeat loudly, and he held the boxes tight to his chest in relief that they were still secure. Obviously Myrra did not understand the extent of the rift, or he would have been prepared for what he saw. Her experience had simply been the challenge of surviving a difficult crossing on broken lyg-lines. She had felt afraid of the depth of the rift, but had not seen what was at the bottom – or if she had seen it, she had not understood.

Now he knew why he had been drawn here. What had started as an amusing adventure to help some bungling lygons had suddenly taken on a new significance – the future of all of Fraith was at stake. . . . The enormity of what had occurred here overwhelmed him – the undersea had been exposed.

Mithia peered down, down into the depths of the rift. Down past the torn crust of the salt-plain, the soil beneath and the tangled mass of tree roots now gasping in thin air, down past the bedrock that had been cracked by the great force of the earthquake, to the thin membrane of the undersea. He felt ill. The task ahead of him was overwhelming. Now he knew why he was here – why he had been drawn to this tiny insignificant island. The undersea had been violated, and he had been drawn here to help. He had been down there, long ago, and it must have remembered him. He sat down, drew his wings in front of him to hide his face and shed a single dragon tear. He asked his heart if he had the strength to do this, and he truly did not know.

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THE LYGONS OF FRAITH - THE ROCK RING

CHAPTER 16A THE TALE OF VALE AND KEBREANA

When Myrra and her Councillors visit the River Pride, and Vale and his consort are strangely absent . . .

‘You *have* to be there!’ Royal Haldor called out to his son, as Vale stormed out of the room. ‘Oneida. You’re his mother – you talk some sense into him!’

‘Give him a bit of time to settle down,’ she said calmly. ‘There’s no point in saying anything more to him now.’

‘But there isn’t time for him to settle down – Myrra will be here tonight. How bad will it look when she finds out that the Royalet and his consort have gone away when we knew she was coming?’

‘Very bad, I agree.’ Oneida tried to soothe him.

‘That sounds like you’re not going to talk him out of it?’ said Haldor.

‘Do you really think I can?’ Oneida sighed.

‘This is just ridiculous,’ Haldor growled, as he leapt up from the royal cushion and bounded to the door. He lashed his tail in anger and caught it painfully on the door frame.

‘Haldor, my love, just leave him . . .’ Oneida called as Haldor pounded down the passage.

The door to his son’s room slammed back on its hinges as Royal Haldor threw it open and stood imposingly in the doorway. Vale was curled up on a cushion with his consort Rochea. Vale’s head was nuzzled into the soft fur of her stomach, while she stroked his ears with her delicate front paws and licked the top of his head. They both looked up in surprise.

Haldor tried very hard to wipe the disgusted look from his face and stick a reassuring smile there instead.

‘It’s Honour Royale Myrra who’s coming, not Kebreana,’ he said, trying to ease the frustration in his voice. ‘She quite specifically said that she was not bringing Kebreana with her. So I honestly don’t understand what the problem is.’

‘No. You wouldn’t,’ sulked Vale.

‘Well, it would help if you tried to explain,’ said Haldor.

‘I’ve told you. I can’t cope with anything that even reminds me of Keb . . . that *cauta*. She’s in Myrra’s pride now, so Myrra will remind me of her.’

‘That’s just ridiculous. All you have to do is greet Myrra and a couple of her Councillors and go to the feast. You’re the Royalet – it’s your role to entertain visiting dignitaries. I’ve never run away from my royal duties, no matter how unpleasant – and nor should you. What are you going to do when you’re the Royal? Hide in your room every time you don’t like someone? That would be despicable.’

‘But I’m not the Royal yet am I? I’m not going to meet Myrra. And that’s final.’ Vale turned his head away. Rochea shrugged apologetically at Royal Haldor who stalked off. She got up to close the door.

‘To be honest, Vale, my love,’ said Rochea as she made sure the door was latched and came back to comfort him again, ‘I don’t really understand either. Why can’t you just front up and be polite to Myrra? You don’t have to say much to her. I’ll be there. Your sisters will be there. Your parents will do most of the talking . . .’

‘Just what I need. My own consort doesn’t care either!’ Vale grabbed a bag and started packing.

‘I do care,’ Rochea was offended. ‘I just don’t understand. How can I if you refuse to tell me what it’s all about? What on earth can Kebreana have done to distress you so much?’

‘Huh! What didn’t she do? The day is not long enough to tell you,’ Vale muttered.

‘Well then, tell me a bit of the story? I can’t be a proper consort to you if there’s a big trauma in your life and I know nothing about it.’

‘Even thinking about her makes me feel sick,’ complained Vale as he paused with a jar of whisker balm in one paw and a bottle of lyntree oil in the other, ‘but I’ll try. Just this once, though. Then I never want to hear Kebreana’s horrible name mentioned ever again.’

‘Kebreana and I are cousins, although I wish that were not so,’ Vale began as he stuffed the jar and bottle in his bag and sat uneasily on a cushion. ‘My mother Oneida, and Kebreana’s mother Keone are sisters, so we grew up together. Kebreana is a couple of sun-cycles older than me.’

‘And a couple of verapin-weights heavier,’ smiled Rochea.

‘True. She is now. But it matters that she’s older – because she’s always been there. When I was a little cautie, at breakfast time, she used to wait until no one was looking, push me aside, eat all the food in my bowl as well as hers, make me ask for more and then take that too. When I tried to tell my parents she denied it and said I must have worms. I became very thin and my parents forced me to take bitterwort for the worms I didn’t have. Eventually the scurrias realised what was going on and they would feed me in the kitchen after dinner. I can’t tell you how horrible it all was.

‘She was always stealing things and spreading rumours about other cauties, and if she got caught out she would blame me, and later my sisters when they came along. Sometimes my parents weren’t sure whether to believe her, but she was a cauta, so it was considered noble for me to take the blame whether or not I’d done whatever it was I was supposed to have done. So my parents kept thinking I did all sorts of sneaky things, and sometimes I wish I had, because then all the punishments might’ve been worth it. Even this,’ Vale held up his half-packed bag, ‘even this running away is something my father thinks is perfectly in character with the sneaky, lazy son he thinks he has. He doesn’t realise how hard it is for me to deliberately neglect my duty – how distraught I am that I don’t feel I have a choice.’ Vale shuddered as he took a couple of deep breaths to steady himself.

‘I still haven’t forgiven her for the day I caught my first sloam. They’re hard to catch around here because you have to go all the way across the grasslands to the edge of the forest, so a first kill is a bit more significant for our pride than it is for some others. I set out early in the morning, determined to make my first kill all on my own. I didn’t want anyone to know what I was up to – especially not *her* – so I went out through the scurrias’ passageway that runs from the kitchen up to the grasslands. It was a hot day and I followed the stream that runs through the dezigild fields. The heat of the sun brought out the perfume of the flowers. The fragrance was so strong it was like a mist that soaked into my fur, and I remember thinking it would help camouflage my scent while I staked out my prey.

‘I forgot how far it was to the forest, and I was still very young, so I got tired. When I finally came in sight of the forest, I had to have a long drink and a rest. The sun was nearly overhead by this stage, which is actually a good time to catch sloams, because they’re asleep.

‘I crept through the sparse undergrowth on the edge of the forest, keeping to the shadows as my father had shown me. What I hadn’t realised when I soaked up the perfume of the dezigild field was that although it disguised my scent, it also made it difficult to smell anything else, so I had to rely on my sight and hearing. Anyway, eventually I spotted a sloam asleep in the branch of a tree not too far from the ground. I tried to remember everything I’d practiced – how to spread the pads of your feet wide and place them slowly to make no sound, how to carefully sink your claws into the bark of the tree and then press your paws against the bark to take your weight to climb surely and silently, how to hold your breath to stay silent and to inhale as you leap and exhale deeply as you land on your prey to power the attack – you must remember, all those things you have to really think about when you are making your first kill. And I did it! But I was glad no one was there to see, because I lost my footing as I pounced and both the sloam and I fell out of the tree, and I landed badly. But I flipped over quickly and pounced on it again as it tried to run away.

‘It is such a special feeling, to make your first kill, especially as a cauto. Somehow when you sink your claws into that warm flesh and the little soul yields its body to you, it is a moment of absolute grace. All the energy and experiences that have been stored in that tiny creature are gifted to you so that you can live and be strong. As a cauto it is a vindication of the reason for your existence – to care for your pride, and with wisdom in your heart, make sure that the order of life will endure.

‘I honoured the sloam by eating its internal organs while they still held the warmth of life, and then I set off with the rest of the carcass to take home and provide for the pride.

‘It was a long way back, the sloam was heavier than I thought, and I had to rest a few times. By the time I was about half-way through the dezigild field I was really struggling to carry it, but the anticipation of how proud my father would be kept me going.

‘I was passing by a patch of red dezigild flowers when she leapt out in front of me. She startled me, as I hadn’t seen her in the red flowers, and I wasn’t expecting to see any of the lygons up there, let alone her.’

‘What was she doing there?’ asked Rochea.

‘She never said, but I presume she had found out where I had gone and was waiting for me. Anyway, I dropped the carcass. She said I looked tired, so she would help me carry it back, and before I had time to reply she had snatched it up and bounded off with it towards the Felicitate. I lost sight of her in the thick field of flowers, and by the time I got to the Felicitate, there she was, at the front door, claiming the kill as her own, a big smile on her face and her ear-tufts all perked up, revelling in the praise and attention.’

‘But didn’t you say it was yours?’ Rochea was shocked.

‘How could I? She had dragged it through the flowers and wiped off any trace of my scent, and slobbered her own all over it. As a royal cauto it would look very poor to try and claim the kill of a cauta. I just had to let her steal the moment, and she knew it.’

‘It wasn’t just that moment she stole – she managed to drain all sense of joy and achievement from my life. In the end it became as though she and I had swapped personas. She made everyone think that I had done the dreadful things that she had done, so that I was like her – and she pretended to be innocent so that they thought that she was like me. She is devious in a way I can never be, because she puts so much effort into it. I didn’t have – I still don’t have – any defence against it, and I faced an endless battle to try and keep my integrity and belief in myself despite what everyone thought of me.’

Rochea thought for a moment, then said, 'But didn't things get better as you matured and reached your adult size? Because you're strong – you've got a royal stature to you.'

Vale gave half a smile, then sat silently for a while. He sighed. 'No, actually, it got worse. I never wanted to tell you this bit, but I can see I will have to. At first I didn't notice the change in her behaviour; it was only when it reached what seemed to me a sudden crisis that I realised it had been coming slowly. Many adult *cautos* miss the signs, so how could I have been expected to know when I was not mature enough to understand?' asked Vale.

'By Salt, what do you mean?' Rochea's eyes widened.

Vale hung his head. 'I mean my body matured before my understanding of adult ways.'

'You and every other *cauto*,' Rochea smiled.

'Keb . . . Kebreana was older than me. When she started giving me food instead of stealing it from me, I just thought she was trying to make amends for all her bad behaviour in the past, and I felt quite touched, and I thanked her for it.'

'You mean she brought you food? But that is *cauto* courting behaviour. No wonder you didn't realise . . . my poor Vale.'

'And when I thanked her, I didn't realise that she took it to mean far more. She started licking my neck as I went past, and offering to help groom my fur. I didn't like any of that, but I put up with it because I told myself that it was better than before. Even if I didn't like her touching me, or sitting so close to me – which I really didn't – at least she wasn't stealing from me, criticising me or getting me into trouble like she always used to. Things did seem to be better . . . just for a while. Then came the day . . .' Vale shut his eyes and his whiskers trembled.

'Hmm?' Rochea encouraged Vale to continue, although she wasn't sure that she really wanted to know.

'The day that I was lying asleep in the sun on the ledge outside the Felicitate. I woke to find her lying next to me, rubbing her cheeks in my belly fur – and she stank! Well – you know. I'd smelled it on adult *lygons* before, but it hadn't meant anything to me, and I'd certainly never had it rubbed on me before. "Vale," she purred in a tone that just terrified me. I jumped up and bolted into the entrance hall where I ran straight into my mother. She smelt it on me straight away and dragged me into her room to ask what I'd been doing. When she finally realised I was telling the truth, chaos broke out. Kebreana was banished to her room, my parents argued with her parents. It was awful.

'I was traumatised. I'd been brought up to believe that mating was a beautiful thing, but I hated the smell of her and the thought of mating with her made me feel sick. I thought I'd never be able to mate properly and that here was yet another way that I would fail my parents.'

'Vale, my love,' Rochea lightly rested her paw on top of his.

'They forbade her, but she wouldn't stop. She kept waiting until I was alone. I spent my whole life trying to avoid her . . .'

'But surely by that stage you could stand up for yourself a bit more?' Rochea was bemused.

'I don't think anyone can stand up to her. She has this way of being so incredibly charming when it suits her. She fooled her parents, she fooled my parents, she fooled the Councillors a lot of the time. Even when she was taking my food, or my kill, she would do it with a gentle smile on her face and an affectionate tone in her voice – it was just her eyes that were cold and determined. If I tried to complain she would look helpless and sob and say she didn't know what she had done to deserve such hostility, and I would just end up looking bad and getting a lecture on the expectations of royal *cauto* behaviour.'

'She didn't get her way when she visited recently,' Rochea commented.

‘True, and you saw the tantrum that provoked. But you must remember we’re not much use to her anymore. I’m sure Royal Aidon gets drowned in sweetness.’

‘Lucky him.’

Vale rolled his eyes, ‘It’s hard to feel very sorry for Royal Aidon, but even he probably doesn’t deserve her attentions. In the end I did do something about it – I went away – which is how I met you, my lovely Rochie.’

‘So is *that* the reason why you came to stay with our pride?’

‘Not entirely. It’s always part of royal training to go visit other prides; find out how they’re run, learn the skills needed to live in different environments. But I went early and stayed away as long as I could. Fortunately I decided to visit the Sand Pride – and there you were,’ Vale smiled and licked the top of her head. ‘And in my absence, Royal Aidon passed through on his way back from visiting Isparag, and Kebreana sank her claws into him.’

‘Did you hear that?’

‘Already?’

‘Myrra’s greeting call, yes.’

‘She’s not meant to be here until tonight.’

Rochea went to the window and looked out carefully. ‘It *is* her. I can just see the back of her near the front door. She’s got a blue lygon, and a green one, with her. No bright red Kebreana as far as I can see – it would seem she was true to her word.’

‘Myrra always is. And wise. And gentle. What are we going to do? We can’t get away now – they’d notice.’

‘We could stay here in our room,’ suggested Rochea.

‘But I feel terrible hiding from her like this,’ said Vale.

‘Then why don’t you go and greet her? There’s still time. It would make your father happy.’ Rochea deepened her eyes as she looked at him.

‘No. No. I just can’t. I would spend the whole time wondering what Kebreana is up to, and what she might have told Myrra about me.’

‘That’s not very fair on Myrra.’

‘It’s not very fair on me either.’

‘You do realise that the whole time that Myrra is here, whether you see her or not, you will still thinking about the issue? Hiding in your room is hardly avoiding it.’

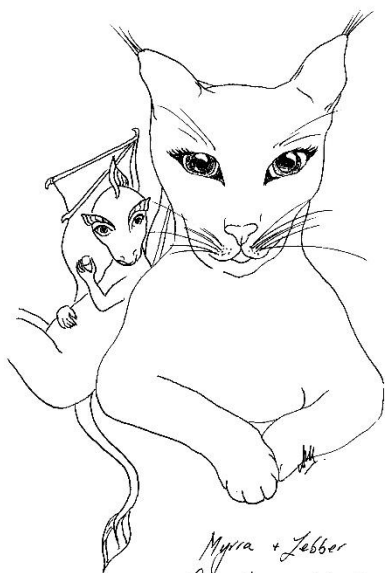
‘Well you go and see Myrra then, if you care so much. Tell her I’m sick or something,’ Vale said petulantly.

‘No, Vale my love. They can tell her we’re away on a holiday. Best keep to that. I’m happy to stay here and care for you. It’s rather pleasant, actually, having you all to myself for a couple of days and no royal duties to perform. It *is* a bit like a holiday,’ Rochea smiled.

‘I suppose . . . but I suspect my father will make me pay a high price.’



COLOURING-IN PAGE



Myra + Zebber
from Hygon Island
by Arlo Kercia

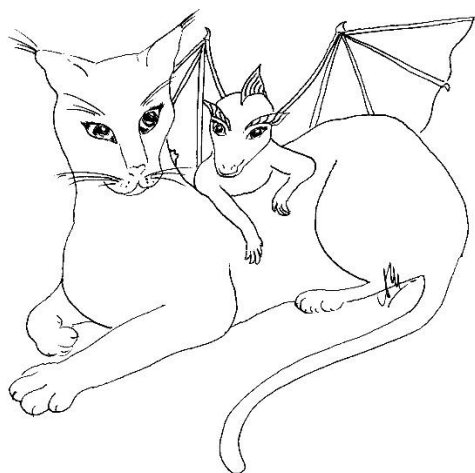


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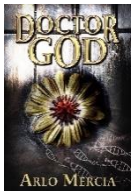
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ABOUT ARLO MERCIA



I am Australian and currently live on the island of Tasmania. I have worked in a range of jobs including as an artist, running a small business selling tea, and in education. Currently I am a senior teacher at the local high-school. I love travelling because then I can indulge my passion for infra-red landscape photography – you can see some of my photos in the background of my author's website.

Writing fantasy novels is the perfect complement to my love of painting, and you can find my artwork both in the books and on my website. I began writing novels about twenty years ago with 'Margot's Men', and now I focus on the fantasy series 'The Lygons of Fraith' which is about a race of beautiful reptilian cats called lygons, their cheeky companions the geflars, many colourful dragons, and a few humans . . .

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