

**Yona and the Beast**

**by**

**C.C. Hogan**

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Fourth Edition

To an old friend who brought a little peace to our valley

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## **Author's Note**

This is a standalone story set against the backdrop of the events of Dirt, series one. For those of you who have read those books, you will recognise some elements. For those that haven't, it will not matter, and you will find the connections when you read the main books at another time. So, whether you are new to Dirt or not, enjoy the story.

For those of you unknowing of such things, a Calliston is a huge, six-limbed creature that lives in quiet communities either on plains or in forests. They are the rarest of the intelligent peoples of Dirt. Please see the Calliston article on the A World Called Dirt website here: <http://aworldcalleddirt.com/abbey/history/natural-history/calliston/>

## Escape

Yona was cold. She was so cold that even with her hands pushed beneath her shirt and buried under her armpits she knew her fingers were blue. She could feel they were blue, feel their numbness. The cold squeezed tightly around her like an ice blanket, unrelenting, uncaring, permanent. Phoran, her man, he was cold too, and colder than she was. He had stopped shivering in the night and that was bad; he was losing the fight. A few had already been lost to the cold. They had moved them gently to the rock wall of the room using the weak light from the simple oil lamp hung from the ceiling. The room was not very large. Yona suspected that it was a storeroom normally. It was built against the cliff of the gorge and the rear wall was cold, dark granite that sucked out what little heat there was. Yona wished the room was smaller as perhaps then the heat from their bodies would keep them warmer. As it was, they were all losing the fight.

“Hold tighter, Phoran. You must stay awake.”

“I am so tired, Yona. I am not built for this life-sucking cold!” He chuckled a little. They were from the tiny, isolated village of Maernen, hundreds of leagues south on the coast of South Homeland. It was a poor, simple, fishing community that had nothing much to do with the rest of the continent of Bind, but Yona and Phoran had been travelling up the river Kane with their ponies to buy cloth and other material their community needed from Mellorn in the Long Valley hills. The slavers had caught them while they camped under the trees one night. It wasn't much of a fight. They were grabbed, beaten, tied up and walked north. They were the first, but by the time they had reached this frozen place in the North Hoar Ridge, there were thirty of them. Now, five had died, and Yona was certain that they would lose more tonight or tomorrow.

“I miss the sun,” said Yona, cuddling her man. “And the sand and the warm wind and the sea! Oh, I miss the sea so much!” she whispered into Phoran's ear. They had already been yelled at through the door once to keep quiet. A sudden wheezing breath, ragged, uncontrolled, echoed around the small room, and she heard a young whimper of pain. They had lost another one, and Yona knew it was Mardia, Beva's mother. Phoran knew it too.

“Go to her, Yona. She will need you. I will cuddle with the others.” Phoran always made things sound so simple, trying hard to be cheerful. He had done so all the way through the many weeks they had spent walking north. When the slavers were out of hearing, of course.

Yona carefully made her way across the room between the restless or sleeping bodies till she found the young girl, weeping over her mother. The small face of the ten-year-old looked up, and she buried herself into Yona's chest; the thin, weak body shaking with agony and grief. Yona held the girl for a moment more, then released her and signalled two others to help move Mardia's body to where the others were by the wall. It wasn't difficult. They had all lost so much weight that even though none felt strong, the bodies were easy to lift.

“What time is it?” asked Phoran when Yona returned, Beva huddling against her.

“I don’t know, my love. Near dawn perhaps. It is some hours since they came with the water.” She settled down and Phoran snuggled into her with Beva. Phoran had been the strong one, but he had tried to stop the slavers beating the women once too often, and they had whipped him with sticks into unconsciousness. Then they had denied him food for a week and whipped him again. Now he was one of the weakest of them, but he was staying alive, somehow.

A cough from the other side of the door attracted Yona’s attention. It was hard to know the time in this cold world, closed off from the light. But in the week they had been held here, there had been no movement at night, so she supposed it was approaching dawn. She could hear distant clattering. They knew the kitchens were a little way down from their room since they had been brought into the building that way. She remembered the brief, healing warmth of the kitchen when they had entered from the freezing gorge, only to lose it again when they were pushed on up the corridor and into this icy prison. More crashing and clattering and some shouting; she couldn’t make out the words.

“What is happening?” asked Phoran, opening an eye.

“I don’t know. Nothing to do with us, I think.”

“Hmm.” He cuddled closer still and wrapped his arm around Beva, who was shivering. There was yet more and louder crashing and shouting, and Phoran snapped his eyes back open. “Something is going on,” he said, a little of his strength returning.

“Sit up, Beva,” said Yona to the girl. Yona stood and leant against the door, listening carefully. She could hear more shouts and cursing, the words clearer now, and then the crash of a door and footsteps running up the corridor. And then ... laughter? They all heard it and Yona turned and shrugged at Phoran.

“I love that Mab-Tok!” someone shouted out. Yona flinched back from the door. It had come from right outside and was full of glee. Phoran had stood up, helped by Beva, and he came over to the door.

“What is going on?”

“I don’t know,” said Yona. “Not the guards, I don’t think.” She put her ear to the door again. She could hear quiet talking and then a huge crash. Then more shouting.

“Behind that door!” This time, it was a young woman’s voice. Yona stepped back, taking Phoran and Beva with her. Something banged against the door, hard.

“Back!” shouted Phoran as they all struggled to their feet. Whoever it was smashed against the door again.

“Are they coming for us?” asked Beva, her voice trembling with panic. Phoran and Yona held her tightly, their own fear stark on their faces. The door crashed open, and in the dim corridor stood a tall young man.

“You are free,” he shouted. “Get out of here!”

Yona didn’t hesitate. To stay was to die, she was certain. Grabbing Phoran and Beva, she ran from the room and headed down to the kitchens, the others behind them. The young man shouted something, but she couldn’t hear what he said. She had to get out of this building more than anything in the world. Yona charged into the kitchen and kept going, dragging the limping, gasping Phoran behind her, the small Beva desperately trying to help him. Then they were outside in the narrow gorge. In the weak, dawn light, was a scene of chaos and madness. Ahead of them, two huge beasts were wailing and crying. One, clad in studded leather, thrashed around angrily, while the other was cowering and whimpering, pushed against the cliff wall. Guards shouted and fired their bows, and above were dragons, dropping rocks down into the gorge. Yona skidded to a halt and the slaves crowded in behind her.



More dragons leapt from the cliff above and dropped rocks on the angry, leather-clad beast, pushing him back while the other monster walked slowly down the gorge.

“What do we do?” Yona asked Phoran, looking around her. She knew they had to head down the canyon, but the way was blocked by the massive beast. It was a calliston, she thought, but far bigger than in the stories she had heard as a child.

“I don’t know!” replied Phoran as a big tan and cream dragon landed with a thump in front of them, its great wings out wide. Yona jumped back in surprise, and Phoran wrapped his arms around her.

“Run to the beast,” the dragon yelled at them. “Get onto its back.” The slaves stared, wide-eyed with fear. “Now!” shouted the dragon, and jumped back into the air.

“Come on!” yelled Yona at the other slaves. To go back inside was impossible, and there was something about the beautiful dragon she felt they must trust. She ran down the steps and along the gorge towards the slowly lumbering animal, the others following anxiously. Across its back was a vast leather blanket made from many oothen hides stitched together, and knotted straps hung down the beast’s flanks which the slaves used to climb up onto the hides. The calliston walked ponderously on four thick legs, its two smaller arms beneath its massive head clutched together in fear.

“Climb up!” shouted Phoran, using his little strength to lift Beva, pushing her up the side of the animal. Others followed, pushing the two other children up ahead of them and climbing up. Phoran grabbed a strap and tried to pull himself up, but his legs gave way and he fell to the ground.

“Get up!” Yona yelled at him, pulling at his arm.

Back up the gorge, the fighting continued. She could see spears and arrows flying backwards and forwards, and hear the angry screams of the other calliston. Phoran struggled to his feet, and Yona, with the help of another man, pushed him up the side of the beast, the two of them scrambling after him. She looked around, panicking. Everyone had made it, somehow, cramped together on the callistons back. Suddenly, the beast rumbled beneath them and broke into a fast trot, huffing and puffing its way down the twisting gorge.

“Do you think he knows where he’s going?” yelled Phoran. He was collapsed down on the hide and was being held tightly by Beva and another woman to stop him sliding off.

“I don’t care!” Yona shouted at him. The beast ran faster and faster down the gorge, twisting and turning, crashing into the rock walls in panic, and suddenly they emerged onto the endless, stony scrub of Great Plains. They were free. Yona burst out laughing, hanging on desperately. “I really don’t care!”

The wind picked up as the large calliston trotted south with the freed slaves hanging onto its back, fearing where the animal was going, but fearing more being left behind on the barren plain.

“It is a dummerhole!” called out Beak, a wanderer who had been captured in the west.

“A what?” Yona shouted back. She had worked her way carefully towards the head of the calliston, looking for reins or anything that would control the animal. She had already tried shouting at it but to no avail.

“A dummerhole,” said Beak, moving up next to her. “It’s a calliston that has been captured young. They drill into its head and scald its brain with a fiery sword, making it dumb. They grow very big.”

“Do you know how to control it?”

“No, sorry. I’ve only heard of them; never seen one. Do you think we should get off?”

“I don’t know. It is running very fast!” Yona peaked down at the ground from the broad shoulders. The powerful calliston was trotting at the speed of a cantering horse, but it was a much smoother ride; it’s four, clawed feet padding like a large cat, not thundering like a cow or an oother. She shivered and looked behind them towards the towering wall of the North Hoar Ridge where dark clouds were being whipped into dramatic forms by the wind. “There’s a storm building.”

“Storms here are bad news,” said Beak, looking north. “They can go on for days and the wind and sand can cut your skin.” He looked back at the slaves, huddled on the oother hide. “We are not dressed for it.”

“Then we hang on,” decided Yona. “We are heading south away from captivity, so we hang on.”

Yona did not mean to take charge, not really, but for some reason, she had stayed stronger than the others, apart from Beak. The small, tough-looking man with dark, weathered skin, seemed hardly affected by their ordeal though his eyes were haunted. Mostly he had kept apart from the others in the room. He smiled once at Yona and made himself as comfortable as he could.

“I might not know much about callistons and dummerholes,” he said, shrugging. “But nothing runs forever.”

As the evening drew in, the storm caught up with them, and the humans lay flat on the calliston’s back, shielding their eyes. Yona was sitting high on the great neck, peering through the gloom and the dust. Beneath her, she felt the calliston rumble. It made a pathetic whimpering sound, surprisingly high-pitched for such a great beast. Without thinking, Yona stroked the thick neck. The skin was not rough, but smooth and covered with short, fine hair.

“Hush,” she said when the calliston complained again. Ahead she could see a small copse of stunted trees, the first she had seen on this barren plain. The calliston turned towards them and slowed. Yona could feel the tiredness in the huge body beneath her like she could with horses. When the animal reached the trees, it slowed to a halt and collapsed, shielding itself from the wind.

“Off!” Beak commanded the others, and they slid from the hide. He jumped down and helped the weakest of them to the ground. Yona slid down and walked around to the front of the calliston. It had laid its huge, dragon-like head down on the stony ground and was panting with exhaustion, curling its smaller front arms under its neck. Yona put her hand on the side of its massive face.

“Thank you,” she said. The calliston breathed out and shut its eyes.

“I don’t think it can understand you,” said Beak.

“Can callistons talk? Like in the stories?”

“Yes, callistons can. Not dummerholes, though.” He looked around and shivered. “I don’t think we dare stay here long, but the river is close and we all need water.”

“We need food too,” said Yona, sitting down by the big head. “So does our friend here, I would think.”

“Maybe it’s like a dragon,” said Beak. “Some say they are related. Dragons can go several days without eating.”

“I had never seen a dragon before,” said Yona. “There were none in the south where we lived. Will you try to get home?” She knew nothing about the small man other than he said he had been wandering.

“I have no home. Nor do most of these here, I reckon. You and your man are different. The girl is homeless and parentless now.”

Yona nodded. They hadn't seen the capture of the others, but she knew that three women and three children, including Beva, had come from a tiny hamlet the slavers had burnt down. They had only taken the women and the girls and killed the rest. She suspected that story was true for nearly all of them. If you have nowhere to return to, you are less likely to escape, perhaps. She huddled down on the ground, shivering as the wind whipped around them.

“Wake up,” said Phoran, shaking Yona. “The storm is getting worse!”

Yona shook herself awake. It was still dark, but there was light in the far east. The wind was battering and howling through the thin trees, and the calliston raised its head and groaned. Yona touched it on the cheek and it blinked at her.

“You are making a friend, I think,” said Beak.

“She does that with horses too.” Phoran smiled.

Yona looked up at him. “You seem a little better.”

“Just a little. The river is over there. I had a long drink. You should too. Take Beva; she's scared.”

“Okay.”

Yona struggled upright, found the young girl, and took her to the river, the two of them drinking greedily with their hands from the rushing cold waters that flowed down from the ridge. Behind them, she heard a loud grumble, like a deep yawn, and the calliston heaved itself heavily to its feet.

“Is he going?” asked Beva.

“Come on, quickly!” They hurried over to the calliston. Beak and Phoran were already hurrying the other slaves onto its back. Yona pushed Beva up and was about to climb up herself when she heard the calliston rumble again. She turned and realised it was looking round at her. “Oh, this might be risky,” she told herself, walking up to its head and touching it again on the cheek. She started walking on ahead to the south, along the banks of the river Cor-En, bracing herself against the wind. Behind her, the beast grumbled a little, then slowly followed her.

“What are you doing?” called down Phoran from the calliston's neck.

“We need him to go south. I don't know how else to tell him.”

“Him?”

“Oh!” Yona laughed. “I don't know!” She looked back at the calliston, following behind her. “I think so, though.” She smiled at the huge beast and broke into a trot, encouraging the animal to follow her. The calliston lengthened its stride, easily keeping up with her short human legs. The wind blew harder and Yona put her hands over her eyes. In a beat, the calliston moved alongside her, shielding her a little, and rumbled at her.

“You are right; I am slowing you down.” She smiled once, then grabbed a strap and pulled herself onto its back. Immediately the calliston broke into a trot, its great head kept low, and ran unerringly south. Perhaps her encouragement was unneeded after all, Yona thought.

The storm followed them most of the day as the calliston kept to his southerly course, his head low and his eyes half closed. At midday, they discovered another of their number dead, this time from hunger, and they held the emaciated man on the hides rather than let him fall. By late in the afternoon, they were leaving the storm behind. They had been travelling along the banks of the river Cor-En, and the desolate plane changed slowly to grassland with the occasional small

grouping of trees leaning over the rushing, milky-blue water. Beak made his way to Yona where she was sitting on the calliston's neck.

"Look behind," he said to her. Yona turned and looked north. Stretched across the plain was a wall of dust reaching to the sky, dark, foreboding, and impenetrable.

"Did we come through that?" asked Yona.

"Only the leading edge and that was bad enough. We will not be chased now. I reckon those slavers are trapped in their gorge."

"Do you know much about these lands?"

"A little. I have travelled to Tellmond for work before. They have mines up there, mostly dug by slaves. I didn't stay long." Beak shrugged as if it was unimportant, but Yona suspected it was anything but. "If you can work out how to stop our friend while it is still daylight, we can light fires and cut some spears from the trees somehow. Some can forage, and some can fish."

"I will try," answered the young woman.

She leant forward along the calliston's neck and pulled at one of the beast's large, soft ears. The calliston's head was huge, but it didn't have the dramatic horns of the dragons, and she could reach the ears easily. The calliston huffed and she pulled again. She had no idea whether it would work, but perhaps if it was annoying, it would stop. The beast twitched its head in irritation and Yona, feeling guilty, stroked the smooth neck. The calliston rumbled and turned its head slightly to look back at her. The large eyes were light brown and golden, and he blinked softly and slowed down. Yona waited till he was slow enough, then slid off his back and trotted along by his head, putting her hand on his cheek. "We'll stop here, friend," she said, slowing her own pace. The calliston, sensing her change in speed, slowed and stopped, and then, with a sigh, lay down.

"Clever!" remarked Phoran, sliding down stiffly.

"I need a hug, Phoran," complained Yona and he wrapped her in his arms.

"I'm not sure I am much good for hugs at the moment. I need to eat. We all do." Beva wandered over to him and pushed her way under his arm.

"So does she," said Yona, touching the girl's face lightly. "I will help Beak. He is going to try to light fires and perhaps fish. I'll check to see how everyone is doing." Behind her the Calliston suddenly grumbled and stood up, the humans scattering quickly.

"What is he doing?" asked Beva nervously.

"I'm not sure," Phoran said to the girl who was squeezing him in fear. He winced in pain.

"A little care with me, Beva," he said softly. "I'm a bit broken."

"Sorry," she said.

The Calliston sniffed the dusty air, then turned and walked to the river, plunging its head into the water. Yona chuckled.

"He has run so far, and he didn't drink last night. Oh, Phoran, I wish knew more about callistons. He is saving our lives and I am doing nothing for him in return."

"Keep him moving us south, and that will help him too, my love."

"I know. I think he knows that too. Go and sit down, both of you. I will help Beak."

Yona, Beak, and five others who were the strongest, split themselves into teams. Three went fishing with sharpened sticks, two collected fallen wood for fires, and two foraged. They had no tools, so they snapped thin sticks to make fishing spears and could only burn what they could find, and eat what they could dig up with bare hands. It took them three hours, but each of the humans fell asleep with a few mouthfuls of food in their stomachs. It was not enough, but it would have to do. They laid the poor man who had died during the day to rest behind a tree.

They had no tools to dig a grave and not enough strength to pick up the large stones on the river bank to cover his body. No one knew his name, but a few wept for him anyway.

“If I remember rightly, the river turns east at some point,” said Beak to Phoran and Yona just after dawn, marking out a sketch on the ground.

“Do you know where we are?” asked Yona.

“I think so,” said the dark-skinned man. “We crossed a trail a little way back yesterday. There’re a couple of roads through here that head towards Ponack in the Sand Hills.”

“I don’t know Ponack,” said Phoran.

“Desert people. Good people. But we should keep heading south.” Beak put a mark on his sketch. “If that trail was here, then later today we will cross another trail heading east. There are hills near there and we might need to move away from the river.”

“If we have a choice,” said Yona, laughing.

“Our friend certainly seems to know where he is going,” commented Beak, thoughtfully.

“What do you mean?” asked Phoran. “I thought you said he is no more intelligent than a horse.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Yona, looking over to where the calliston was walking through the grass, pulling leaves from sturdy bushes with his hands and eating them. “Something in his eyes is very different from our horses, and I sometimes think he can understand me a little. Where do you think he came from?”

“I don’t know,” replied Beak. “I was taught some about callistons when I was young, but I have no idea where they live.”

“Some of the others are worried,” said Phoran. “We desperately need more food. A couple said we should be resting and foraging. We can do nothing while on the calliston’s back.”

“They have a point,” replied Yona. “But there is nothing much here.”

“It will be greener near those hills, and then we will cross into Epinod,” said Beak. “One more day and we will think again.”

Behind them in the distance, the storm was still raging. But though it was very windy as they headed south, the sun warmed them, and as they approached the hills the Calliston suddenly slowed.

“What is it?” Yona asked the great beast, leaning forward on his neck. He rumbled deeply and stopped, and she jumped down. “What have you seen?” The calliston had moved away from the river to avoid a thick woodland, and they had crossed the second of Beak’s trails. Yona shielded her eyes from the sun, trying to see what the large eyes had spotted.

“Deer!” Phoran hissed down from his vantage on the beast’s back. “On the edge of the woods to the right.”

“I can see them. Why has he stopped?”

“Why wouldn’t he? Callistons aren’t vegetarians,” said Beak, jumping down.

“Do they hunt?”

“Farm, hunt, cook. Him? I don’t know.”

“Let’s get everyone down,” said Phoran. “I can see a stream over there and we’re not drinking enough.”

Yona and Beva helped Phoran lower himself from the hides, and the others headed to the stream and the shade of the trees. The calliston walked slowly towards the deer. Yona trotted up

to the beast's head and was surprised when he put his hand on her shoulder and pushed her gently aside.

"Let him go," whispered Beak. Yona nodded and watched the beast make his way towards the deer. He was walking incredibly slowly, almost meandering, and occasionally stopped and picked something from the odd bush.

"Clever," said Phoran. "It is like the sharks we see off the coast. Sometimes they swim gently and slowly among other fish and then suddenly attack. I bet that's what he's doing." The calliston was now walking through the small herd of deer, towering over them. They were obviously wary of the huge visitor, but most continued to eat, their ears twitching nervously. Then the calliston moved. The freed slaves had only thought of him as a cumbersome beast over the last few days, using him simply as if he were a ridiculously big horse. But callistons are not like horses or cattle, they are more like dragons or bears. They are supple, strong, and, as two deer found out, incredibly fast. In a flash, the calliston lunged out at the two deer who were standing to the side of him, grabbing one with a large hand and the other with his mouth, then pinned them to the ground.

"Come on!" shouted Yona, running to help the calliston who was struggling to keep hold of both animals. Beak shot after her followed by another woman, and the two women pounced on the deer, holding them tightly while Beak grabbed up a rock and used it to beat them unconscious.

"Two?" the small man asked. "Why two?"

Yona stood and walked to the calliston who had stepped back a short way, and she put her hand on his face. The big animal blinked and rumbled quietly. "It's for us," said Yona. "He has caught one for us."

It was hard work. With only unhelpfully smooth, rounded stones and split branches, bleeding and cleaning the deer had not been simple. But they had managed eventually, and had roasted the smaller one in pieces over a fire while the calliston had taken the other away a short distance to eat on his own. For the first time in weeks, the remaining twenty-two humans had almost full bellies, as did the calliston, and they sat around by the small stream talking while the beast dozed peacefully nearby. Beva, the young girl, had been nervous of the massive animal, as they all had, but with encouragement from Yona, had put her hand on his warm, smooth face and he had rumbled in pleasure. Now she was sitting down next to him, leaning against his head, sleeping.

"Whatever we do next, Phoran, she will have to come with us."

"We wanted a family," he murmured as Yona leant against him.

"I am sorry, Phoran. I don't know why I can't get pregnant."

"It might be me," he said. "Definitely me at the moment! Sitting here cuddling is about my limit."

"You always find something to make me smile," said Yona, reaching up and stroking his face. She had checked him over earlier, as she had checked the rest of them, and though some of his bruises were beginning to fade, some of them were still vivid, and a couple of the scars on his back from being whipped had started to bleed again.

"What are we doing next?" Daintine, an older woman, sat down next to them. "Do we know where we're going?"

"Not really, other than south," said Yona, looking over to the calliston. "But I think he does." She frowned slightly. "And I think the dragons did, too."

"In what way?" asked Phoran.

Yona sat up. “Think about it. All that fighting, and that other beast screaming, and yet this big fellow was walking down the gorge only slowly. If I had been him, I’d have been running! Then we all climbed up on his back and as soon as the last of us were up, he started trotting, like someone had commanded him.”

“But how could they command him?” asked Daintine. “Beak says the animal has a damaged mind.”

“I don’t know, Daintine, but they say callistons and dragons are related. Perhaps he understood something they shouted.” Yona shivered and looked north. “That storm is moving this way again. I think we should try to make more headway before dark.”

“Some will object, but you are right,” said the older woman. “That deer was welcome, but we are all frightened, Yona. Why are you so strong?”

Yona looked into the woman’s eyes and shook her head. “Oh, Daintine, I am not!” She wiped away a sudden, unwelcome errant tear and went to wake the calliston.

“She is strong, Daintine, whatever she says,” said Phoran. “Always has been. But she is frightened too.”

“When we get to Epinod, I think a couple are heading west, but the rest of us have nowhere to go. You have, don’t you.”

“Yes, we do. It’s a long way, but our village is in the far south. We were some leagues from there when we were caught.” Phoran looked over to where Beva and Yona were laughing at a huge yawn from the waking calliston. “But I am not sure it’s quite that simple,” he added quietly.

“I can’t get him to stop!” shouted Yona at Beak in panic. “He’s speeding up!” The calliston had been heading south-east all afternoon without stopping. Now they had reached the growing river Cor-En and the big animal was charging towards the bank.

“The river is deeper here!” shouted Beak, joining Yona on the neck. “I hope he can swim.”

“I can’t!” said Beva, hanging on to the hide, her knuckles white. “I’m going to drown!”

“Hold on, girl,” said Phoran, grimacing with pain as he wrapped his arms around the small girl.

Yona peered ahead. The sunlight had been failing rapidly, but she had let the calliston continue rather than stopping early. The winds had reached them in the afternoon and they had been caught in a massive thunderstorm; the more leagues south they covered today, the better. “Getting closer! Everyone hang on tight!”

Beneath her, the calliston rumbled and let out a roar, and he pushed his head forward. When they reached the stony bank, he almost jumped into the water, a huge wave pushing ahead of him, and he drove his way across. The river was much wider and faster here, having been joined by another behind the hills, and the big beast had to fight his way across. The humans hung on desperately, waves of cold water washing over the hide. Beva coughed and spluttered when she swallowed water accidentally, and Phoran sat her up, banging her on the back with one arm while he hung on with the other.

“Nearly there!” shouted Beak.

“Look out!” warned Yona as the calliston hit a channel and plunged deeper into the water, crying and bellowing in panic. Beak grabbed the man behind him who was sliding off the hide.

“Help me!” he yelled at Yona. Yona caught hold of the man’s arm, but her hands were cold, and she felt him slipping from her grasp.

“Beva, hold onto the hide!” shouted Phoran, and leant over to help Yona and Beak. The man was panicking and fighting them to stay on.

“Hold still,” Beak shouted at him, but it was too late. The man kicked and struggled in desperation, making it impossible for them to hold on to him, and then he fell backwards into the fast-moving river and washed away from them, sinking beneath the water. Phoran grabbed Yona before she fell in after the man, and pulled her back onto the hide. With a roar and pathetic cry, the calliston found his feet, and hauled himself up the bank, panting and gasping.

Yona stared at the river. Another one. There had been thirty of them when they had reached the gorge and six of them had died in that freezing room. Now they had lost two more on the journey. She slid from the hides and went around to the calliston’s face. He looked as frightened as they, and as the others climbed down from his back, he lay down and curled his head around, tucking his large hands under his chin.

“What happened?” Beak asked her. “Why did he do that?” The man was angry.

“Look at him, Beak!” snapped Yona. “He is scared. Whatever it is that is driving him south, he had to cross the river and it frightened him.” She put her hand on the beast's face. She could feel him shaking. “There are trees over there. We need fires,” she said. Beak nodded and went to help the others. Yona sat on the ground by the large head. The calliston’s eyes were open wide and he shivered and grumbled.

“Is he alright?” asked Beva in a small voice, sitting down and snuggling against Yona.

“The river frightened him.”

“Can’t he swim?”

Yona looked down at the small girl, thinking about how the massive, powerful animal had struggled against the current, crying and roaring as he had crossed. “You are a clever one,” she said to the girl. “No, I don’t think he can.”

Beva leant against the beast who shuddered and whimpered, almost nuzzling her. “I can’t swim either and I am frightened as well,” the girl told him.

Yona looked at them. The small, thin, tired girl, only ten years old, and the giant calliston, big enough to carry all of them crammed together on his muscled back. Suddenly, they really didn’t look very different at all. Softly, Yona started to sing to both of them, the unrequited mother inside feeling their fear.

*Dark though the night,  
You hold me so tight,  
Beneath the light of moons,  
Until the light of day.*

*Oh, tender love,  
Flying high above,  
Sing now of romance true,  
As with you I now lay.*

*Sleep here with me,  
Beneath the oaken tree,  
And we will dream of sun,  
As we travel on our way.*



The calliston and the child had fallen asleep.

“And that is why I love you so much,” whispered Phoran in Yona’s ear, kneeling behind her. Then he held her close while she buried her head in his hair and cried. His turn to be strong.

The morning saw a large fire, a very pleased Beak, and a man called Hekon brandishing rabbits.

“We found an abandoned farm just in the woods there,” said Hekon as they handed the rabbits to Daintine to gut. To her delight and surprise, he gave her a small knife. “Seems like they left a few tools. Very rusty, but it polished up on a rock and I am not complaining.

“We also found one old axe head and a broken shovel,” added Beak. “And there is some canvas back there. It’s a bit mouldy, but it should clean up.”

“I will come and help,” said Yona, getting up from where she had been cleaning the wounds on Phoran’s back with some herbs and water. “Anything like pottery there?”

“Some broken bits, but we haven’t looked through everything,” said Hekon. “I think it’s been abandoned some years because the roof is half fallen in.”

“Well, I suggest we stay here the day then,” said the young woman. “I know Noenna and two others want to head west into Epinod, but I suspect a day’s rest for them first would be sensible before they set off on foot.”

“Are we still heading south?” asked Beak. “Not that I am complaining.”

“I suspect so,” replied Yona. “I think our big friend has decided to go where it’s warmer, but I am not sure where that is. Whatever, he is certainly desperate enough to run south and cross a dangerous river.”

The old, ruined house looked to Yona to be perhaps a woodsman’s cottage rather than a farm, but she thought Hekon had been right and it had been abandoned for many years. It took them an hour to rescue what they could, and they dragged it all back to the others wrapped in the tatty canvases they had found. With a lot of cursing and struggling, they managed to get the canvases into the edge of the river and scrubbed them clean of moss and mould with stones, before hanging them from branches to dry.

“Have you somewhere to go?” Yona asked Noenna as the woman used a tatty end of one of the canvases to make a small bag.

“I have family in Essenor, I hope,” she said with a tired sigh. “Or I used to many years ago. I want to try.”

“You could still come with us.”

“Do you know where you are going?” asked Noenna, raising an eyebrow.

Yona laughed. “No, possibly not, but every league we get farther from the North, I feel better, and that is enough for now.”

Noenna gave the young woman a hug. “You are very special, Yona. You and Beak and your man Phoran have kept us all going, even before we reached that terrible room. People will remember that you know. I will. Will you return to your village?”

“I’m not sure. Neither Phoran nor I have family. We are fisherfolk and we have both lost people to the sea. If our big friend goes that far south, then yes, perhaps. If not, then I don’t know. It’s a very long way.”

“Why do you feel so close to this beast? I know he has saved us, but so would have horses.”

“Perhaps.” Yona looked over at the calliston who was drinking from the river while Beva sat on his neck, laughing at something. “There was once an intelligent person in there. He would

have been able to speak like us, think like us, and he and his people worked the land and lived in a village. I know he is damaged, has been harmed and his brain partly burnt away, but somehow, I think he is still in there. I can't abandon him."

Noenna laughed softly. "As I said, very special."

The day of resting had been a good decision, and when they settled down to sleep, Yona once again sung a soft lullaby to the young girl and the calliston. In a way, they were both orphans.

"You have taken them both in, haven't you," said Phoran, leaning against the warm flank of the sleeping beast, and holding Yona gently in his arms.

"Do you mind?"

"No," he said dreamily. "They need you and I think you need them."

"I need you as well," she said, and kissed him deeply, running her hands down his chest. Then she pulled back, smiling. He had fallen asleep. "But I can wait," she said with a little giggle, and laid down next to the calliston. As she drifted off, she felt a large hand drape across her body and pull her close.

Noenna and her two friends left at dawn, but the others waited till midmorning, so the canvases were thoroughly dried in the sun before they too set off, leaving the dangerous river behind. They had found a few old pots in the abandoned cottage and these they filled with water and wrapped up in scraps of canvas. They made up a rough bag to hold their few possessions which they draped across the back of the calliston. Phoran insisted the remaining nineteen discuss what they should do. Yona explained she had no real way of controlling the calliston, so if they remained on his back, they would be travelling on his whim, not theirs. A couple were worried by this, but for the moment, they, like Yona wanted to get as far from the north as possible. They were all very much aware that if that unknown young man had not broken down the door of their prison, they would either be slaves working in the mines or dead.

The Calliston spent some of the day walking rather than trotting as he had before, almost as if he was unsure of his direction, and towards evening, he had slowed down enough that except for Beva, they all slipped from his back and walked along with him.

"Are you happy up there?" Phoran called to Beva. As much as Yona may have adopted the girl, the girl had definitely adopted the calliston.

"He is so warm!" said Beva. She had wriggled off the hide and was sitting right up at the top of the calliston's neck. Her legs were nowhere near long enough to go around his neck, and she was half up on her knees.

"I was thinking about Sina's youngest," said Yona to Phoran.

"Oh, little Levvi. What about her?"

"About the same age as that one. When she was younger, she had a habit of adopting baby birds and anything else that just might be an orphan, and bringing them home. Drove Sina mad."

"So?"

"Well, at least she didn't rescue a calliston!"

"What, like you have?" Phoran chuckled, then winced when Yona punched him on the arm. Just then, Beak trotted up. He had decided to walk on ahead since they had slowed down. Once again, Yona was amazed at how much better he had fared than the rest of them. Watching as they all now walked, she realised some were close to falling. They would need to get back up onto the calliston.

"Village ahead," he said. "Can you get our friend to stop?"

“I’ll try.” Yona stepped up to the head of the calliston and put her hand on his cheek. The great creature stopped at once and softly pushed his head against her. Without thinking, she took his hand.

“Impressive,” said Beak with a smile. “I don’t suppose we should all just invade the village. It looks rather small, but perhaps we could ask questions at the tavern if they have one.”

“I suspect our funds are probably zero,” commented Phoran.

“I know,” said Beak sadly. “I really could do with a beer.” The thirsty looks around him showed he was not the only one. “We will have to apologise and hope they greet us anyway.”

“You and Yona go in,” said Phoran. “It will seem less threatening that way. I, Hekon and Daintine will get a camp set up and find water. Ask them if there is anywhere we can hunt. We are desperate for food again.”

Yona squeezed the big hand of the Calliston. “Rest here with Beva, we won’t be long.” To Beak’s amusement, the beast rumbled softly and lay down on the ground. Beva laughed and pulled at his ears, at which point he shook his neck just enough to dislodge her, and the thin girl slid off his back into a giggling heap.

“I think I’m rapidly reassessing the entire idea of a dummerhole,” said Beak as they walked to the village. “I’m sure that he understands you, at least a little.”

Yona studied the short man. “I know you are from DeVale, Beak. Noenna thought you might go with them.”

“She offered.”

“So?”

“Why didn’t I go? I only lived there a while and I haven’t been there for years. I was travelling in the west when they caught me a few months back and they dragged me all over the place before I ended up in that room.”

“Have you family?”

“Not really.” He frowned, his usually quiet but unreadable expression replaced by a shadow of pain. “Not any more. Not for years.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s the curse of these lands, isn’t it? Too easy to lose someone and few care. All of us are the same in one way or another. Phoran said you two have no family.”

“No, but we do have the village. It’s very small and people are close.”

“You are both young.”

“I’m twenty-six next year. Phoran is thirty. You?”

“Does it matter?” he asked quietly.

Yona glanced towards the man. She knew he was older than any of them, she could see it in his eyes, but he was also tougher and stronger. “No, not really. You just seem to know a lot, as if you have travelled for a long time.”

The village was small, only twenty houses or so, but there was a inn next to a livery with two nickering horses leaning over the rough fence. Beak hesitated at the door, thinking about his lack of coin, but Yona pushed past him with a smile and entered the small, dark common room.

“Only just opening,” said a large woman behind the counter as she stacked a few terracotta bottles on a shelf. “Haven’t lit the lamps yet. What you be having; bottle or cask?”

“I’m sorry,” said Yona, with a regretful look. “We are passing through and camping, but we have no coin. We just want a little information.”

“Well, that is a rarity,” said the big woman. “People like our ale, but ask away.”

Yona smiled and then realised she really had no idea what to ask.

“We are heading south,” said Beak, coming to her rescue. “We are not very sure what is ahead of us. We need to hunt and forage, you see.”

“Oh, well, stranger still,” said the large woman, beckoning the two to sit on the stools at the small bar. “Marrin!” she shouted out the back. “I can tell you about the roads easily enough; there ain’t one, not heading directly south anyways. As for hunting, you need to ask my son as he’s always out chasing deer for my stews. We like a good venison stew with potato here, you see. Makes a change from goat.”

Yona couldn’t help it, but her stomach rumbled. The deer they had eaten had filled a hole and the rabbits had helped, but they were all still hungry. Those were the only two proper meals any of them had eaten since they had been captured. “I am sorry,” she said, looking embarrassed.

“Are you hungry then, love?” The woman peered at her suspiciously.

“A little,” said Yona quietly.

“Hmm. Come with me, girl,” said the big woman, and walking around from behind the bar grabbed Yona by the arm and dragged her out the front door and into the light. If you spend all your time with people who are in exactly the same situation as you are, you don’t think much about what you look like after a time. Since they had been imprisoned, none of them had been fed, but even before that, as they had been forced to walk the length of Bind, they had been given only the minimum. As Yona stood by the big, well-fed landlady, she was suddenly conscious of how thin both she and Beak were, and even more obviously, how filthy and ragged their clothes.

“I’m sorry,” said Yona, feeling she wanted to somehow cover herself up.

“Oh, the gods, girl! You are starved! You too, sir. What has happened to you?”

The two of them just stood there. Even the tough Beak, who always seemed so confident, looked at the ground.

“How many are there of you? You got no horses. Just the two of you?”

“No,” said Yona hesitantly. “Nineteen of us, including three children.”

“Are you all like this?” snapped the woman. Yona swallowed. “You, sir, answer me. What of the others?”

“Worse. We are the strongest.”

“Marrin! Get out here!”

“Yes, ma!” A tall man in his thirties stepped out of the inn wearing a large leather apron.

“My son is the smith here,” explained the landlady. “Sir, take my son to where the rest of them are. Marrin, I want to know what state they are in. You know what to look for.”

“Ma.” The man beckoned to Beak and the two walked out of the village.

“Now, girl, come back in. You are going to tell me what is going on and what you are running from.”

“Better?” Yona nodded, eating the last of the bread and cheese the landlady, Golla, had given her. “When were you captured?”

“Three months ago, I think. Maybe longer. I’ve lost track. We were down south near Mellorn when they caught us. The others are from different places.”

“And you are trying to get back there?”

“I don’t know,” said Yona tiredly.

“Why don’t you know?”

“Me and Phoran, we have a village to go to, but the others with us, some were travellers, and many are from tiny places much smaller than this. The men burnt them down and took who they wanted. They have nowhere to go.”

“How long have you been on the road?”

“Five days since we escaped.”

“Five days from the ridge on foot?” commented Golla in surprise.

Yona closed her eyes and cursed to herself. She had left out a lot of details, not sure what she should say, and she had said nothing about the how they had been travelling.

“Ma!” Marrin clattered into the common room. “They got a bloody dummerhole!”

“What?” Golla’s eyes snapped open like a scared cat. Then she frowned. “Marrin, what are the others like, son.”

The big man walked up to the bar. “They need you, ma. Need your help.”

“Alright. Go get the cart and fetch Sarrena and that lazy git of a husband of hers.” Suddenly the landlady sounded very much more serious and officious. “And you, girl, are going to tell me exactly what has happened to you and how you managed to escape from Wessen! Cos I don’t know of anywhere else that has one of those poor creatures.”

Yona couldn’t sit down and do nothing as ordered, and she and Daintine insisted on helping the big landlady and her friend tend wounds and give out tonics, while Marrin and Beak built a fire and roasted two goats that the smith had brought in the back of the cart. In the meantime, Gorr, Sarrena’s husband, was looking carefully at the calliston.

“You not been directing him then?” he asked Yona as she put her hand on the broad face. The calliston rumbled softly. “Well, there’s a thing, girl.”

“I think he’s trying to find somewhere,” said Yona. “We were told by a large dragon to climb on his back and as soon as we did, he started trotting. Once out on the plain, he just headed south to here.”

“Dragon, eh? What it look like?”

“I’m not sure, sorry. Big, huge; I’ve never met one before.”

“Light brown?”

“I suppose so. It was only dawn and still dark.”

“Draig yr Anialr then,” said Gorr. “Desert dragon from Ponack. I wonder what they were up to? Not like them to be going into Tekkinmod’s territory.”

“Tekkinmod?” She hadn’t heard the name.

“That is who your slavers were working for. That was his hall you were at.”

“How do you know?”

“I was born in Ponack and lived there till I was twenty. Then my parents wanted to move down south, so I came with them to Markon Vale here.”

“Do you know anything about Callistons?”

“Never seen one, but we learned about them.” Gorr was tall and his manner was offhand, but despite Golla accusing him of being lazy, Yona saw only a clever, sharp-eyed man. “He is quite old I think.”

“How old?”

“Oh, I don’t know exactly, but you see no one has been creating dummerholes for centuries, thank the gods. Golla had heard they had one up in Wessen, but I didn’t know about that when I was in Ponack.”

“They had two. One was all dressed in heavy leather.” Yona looked sad. “It was screaming and angry.”

“A war dummerhole. What happened to it?”

“I don’t know. The dragons were driving it back with rocks when we ran and climbed on the back of our friend here.” The calliston rumbled again as if he had understood her. “Where do you think he comes from?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know,” said Yona, yawning. “I’m sorry; I am so tired. Oh, dear!” Suddenly she wobbled and Gorr leant forward to grab her, but before he had a chance, the calliston caught her and sat her gently on the ground.

“Well, I’ll be!” said Gorr, scratching his head.

“See, I told you to sit down, girl,” called out Golla, heading over with a mug of hot tea.

“Drink this.”

“Thank you,” said Yona. “Why are you being so kind to us?”

“Cos you need it,” said Golla, dismissively.

Early the following morning, Yona was woken by the calliston. He was up on his feet, looking impatient, and making little wittering sounds.

“What is it?” asked Yona, trying to calm him down. The calliston lowered his head and nudged her, pushing her towards the village. “You want to head off again?” Yona sighed and looked at the others, still asleep. They were ragged and worn, and Golla had insisted that they had to stop for at least a day. “We can’t, dear one. Hush!” The calliston was obviously upset. “Do you want me to sing to you? I don’t know what else to do.” He whimpered again. “Shush!”

Very deliberately, she sat down cross-legged in front of the huge animal, looking up into his big eyes. Slowly, he calmed down, then he lay back on the ground. Briefly, he reached forward and touched her head with his big, clawed hand. She had been surprised how small his hands were. They were five or six times the size of a man’s, but the calliston was enormous, and they looked out of place. Beak had said he thought perhaps the hands were the size of a normal calliston which he believed would be half the size of the dummerhole. Yona reached up and held the big hand to the side of her face.

*I love the morning,  
The way it wakes the world.  
I love the light wind of change,  
As it passes cross the land.  
I love the rays of hope,  
When they touch upon my face.  
And I love the way you look at me,  
With eyes so full of grace*

*I need you to love me,  
To trust that I love you.  
I need your arms around me,  
So the demons won’t win through.  
And I will walk right by you,*

*As we journey on our way.  
And love you every bit as much  
As I did on our first day.*

As she sung, the calliston put his head down and rested the soft nose of his great snout on her knees. Slowly he breathed out and closed his eyes.

By the trees, Golla climbed down from her cart, watching the distant scene.

“She is special that one,” she said.

“Like you, ma? A healer?”

“No, not a healer. I would know if she was. She has something, though.”

“Are you going to tell her about the calliston?”

“No. I asked Gorr to say something. Better coming from him as he comes from Ponack, but I think she has worked it out anyway. Come on, let’s get this fire started for these poor people. We can’t do much for them, but we can give them a day of ourselves.” Marrin reached down and wrapped his big arms around his round mother. “And what was that for?” she asked, taken aback.

“That is because you always do the right thing ma, and I love you for it!”

“Come on, you big lump!”

“So where was this village?” Beak asked Gorr as he, Yona and Phoran sat by the small stream in the woods. The day had warmed up and they were grateful not to be sitting on the back of the calliston, and to rest. Most were sleeping, apart from Beva and the other two children. So typically, they seem to be recovering faster than the adults.

“Down in the Kelaine Hills, I think, though I don’t know exactly where. As far as I am aware it was abandoned several centuries ago, but I have no idea what happened to the callistons.”

Yona looked over to where their calliston was being teased gently by Beva though he seemed unperturbed. “That’s it, isn’t it,” she said, almost to herself. “He is trying to find his way home.”

“Could be,” said Gorr with a shrug. “I don’t know, but I reckon he’s old enough. Probably taken young, maybe ten or fifteen years old. If the other was the same size, they might have been taken together, but no way to know that for sure.”

“I don’t understand,” said Phoran. “Everyone keeps telling me that callistons are intelligent people. Why would anyone want to drill into their heads and use them like this?”

“Haftens it was that dreamt this up,” said Gorr bitterly. “That is what I was taught. They never did like the dragons and callistons much, apparently. That was a couple of thousand years back, though. I never thought to ever see a dummerhole, not in my time. I bet those dragons were upset.”

“What are they like?” asked Yona. “Where we are from in the south there are none. I never even knew of anyone who met a dragon. Might as well be fairy stories.”

“The desert dragons? Crazy, for the most part.” Gorr grinned, something they had not seen so far. “Loud too! Always shouting at each other or playing tricks. Never boring with dragons around, that’s for certain.” His smile dropped. “But they are deadly serious underneath the silliness. They look at the world differently from us, you see. They don’t understand borders and they don’t look for differences between people. My mother was a rider when she was young. She said that from up there in the sky, the world is so different. It’s all joined up. Those

desert dragons, they have a real thing about injustice, whether that's to dragons or to humans. They will have been really upset about the dummerholes and they can be right evil buggers when they get upset."

"Did you ride?" asked Beak.

"No, I didn't. I wanted to, but I got a problem with my ear as a child and I lose my balance sometimes. No good on a dragon that, a thousand feet up. So I never did."

"I'm sorry," said Yona.

"Hmm." The man looked at her. "You know, I talked to quite a few of you all last night and today, girl, and I am pretty sure of two things."

"What is that?" asked Yona quietly.

"Firstly, I am not sure any of you would be here without you, girl. Even with this bloke over here." He thumbed over at Beak. "And the other thing I learned is you have absolutely nothing to be sorry about. Try saying it less, even if sorry you feel." He flashed a little grin, jumped to his feet, and walked over to check on the calliston.

Phoran, Beak, and Yona sat in silence for a few moments, their thoughts on their pasts and their uncertain future. Beak took a stick and started marking out a map in the sand. He looked at it and sighed.

"Eighty," he said.

"What?" asked Yona.

"I was twenty-five when bandits killed my wife and my son and burnt my farm to the ground. I have been on the road for more than fifty years." Yona stared at him with her mouth open. He didn't look more than forty years old. He stabbed his stick into his map, leaving it stuck in the ground. "That's where we are going. I know where it is." He stood and walked off on his own through the woods.



## The Hills

The calliston was trotting through the gentle countryside at a crisp pace. It had taken Yona every ounce of persuasion she had to keep the calliston by the village for one more day, but she had no choice. Overnight one of the older women had fallen ill, despite food and water, and Golla had ordered them to wait. Now, according to a map Beak had made up, borrowing some thin leather from the ever-helpful people of the village of Markon Vale, they were heading to the Kerron Hills. If they had guessed right, and the calliston, from some distant memory, was trying to find his way home, then two more days after that and they would arrive at the old, long-abandoned place where once had been a calliston village. What happened then was anyone's guess.

They had spoken long and hard about it the previous day as Yona had become increasingly worried she was somehow dragging them unwillingly across the continent of Bind. She had had to stop herself saying sorry countless times and had silently cursed Gorr for pointing it out. But, despite her worries, none had wanted to remain at the village or take any other path. It was Phoran that explained the reason to her as they had ridden the calliston around the village, heading south.

"It's partly the three children," he had said. "They have recovered faster than the rest of us and have been running around making sure everyone's alright. They have bound everyone together. And you think everyone is looking for a village? Well, they have already found one. It might not have a place to build yet, but it exists, and is sitting on the back of your calliston."

Her calliston. Golla had taken her aside.

"He is connecting to you and you to him, Yona. I don't know how, and I know a lot of things, but he is. You be careful of that girl. I reckon that beast won't let go of you now. You have got a responsibility to him."

She knew the big landlady was right and she had no intention of letting him down. Or any of them.

"He is bouncing more than before!" Beva was sitting on the calliston's neck between Yona's legs.

"I think he's in a rush, Beva."

"Does he have a name?" asked the girl.

"I don't know, Beva," said Yona with a chuckle. "I hadn't thought about it."

"I heard Beak talking, saying when the calliston was young he would have had parents and they could all talk. I bet he had a name."

Yona sighed. Beva had big ears, she had noticed. In the last day, she had also become even more cuddly, to both her and Phoran, and last night she had woken up with a bad nightmare. With getting fed and feeling physically better, the girl was beginning to miss her mother much

more, and the tragedy of her death in that cold, dark room was raising its head. “We could give him a name. Have you got one?” asked Yona.

“I don’t think I should name him.”

“Why not?”

“He is old,” said the girl, stroking the beast’s neck with her hand. He rumbled in pleasure. “I am only little. He needs a proper name, not a silly name.”

Yona doubted the girl quite realised what an incredibly grown up thing that was to say.

“Alright. Then an old friend needs an old name, something proper.” Yona thought for a few minutes. Most people she knew could neither read nor write, and their use of words was simple and straightforward. But she had been taught to read when very young, and her adopted mother had even taught her some of the older Adelan words that she had learned as a child. “Eldola.”

“What?” asked Beva.

“Eldola. That is what I will name him. Eld is the older form of the word old and Gholia is a very, very old word for friend. Probably where the landlady’s name came from too. So, let’s join them together. Eldola; old friend.”

“I like that,” said Beva. “He is a friend, isn’t he?”

“Yes, a good friend.” They sat quietly, and Beva leant back and snuggled into Yona’s arms.

The four tall, strong, and dark-skinned warriors stood before them with bows pulled. Yona and her villagers, because that is now how they called themselves, had been walking next to Eldola the callistion. He had slowed down and seemed confused as if he didn’t know where he was going. They had lost the trail a while back and even Beak wasn’t sure of the way. Then the warriors had walked silently out from the trees before them and the callistion had stopped, frozen in his tracks. Now they stood staring at each other in silence. Yona stepped forward, and Phoran hissed a warning. He was a very tall man and yet these warriors were nearly a head taller still, and their bows had to be eight feet in length.

“Pharsil-Hin,” murmured Beak. “Nomads. They defend their own, but they are never bandits. She will be safe, Phoran.”

Yona took a nervous breath and walked to the tallest of the men and stood in front of his bow. “Please,” she said. “We are lost.” He studied her with his head on one side. They were all looking better since they had left Markon Vale, but they were still thin, and their clothes ragged.

“You are slaves,” he said simply.

“We were.”

“You escaped?”

“Yes. With the callistion several days ago.”

“You have weapons?”

“No. Just a couple of knives and a broken axe.”

The tall nomad lowered his bow. “I am Han-so-Terena. We will feed you and arm you.” The four nomads turned, walked down the trail, and then headed up into the hills. Beak walked up next to Yona.

“Do you always make friends so quickly?” he asked.

“She does,” said Phoran, chuckling. “Except with the fish. They swim away if they see her and she’s banned from the boats.”

Yona glared at him, then returned to Eldola and gently encouraged him to follow them up into the hills. The callistion seemed pleased to be walking with purpose again and padded

alongside the young woman, emitting a low, soft rumble. Beva trotted up on the other side of his head.

“Who are they?” she asked.

“They are nomads,” explained Beak.

“I have never heard of them,” said Yona, frowning again. “I think they’re alright, though.”

“I am not frightened,” said the girl firmly.

“You aren’t?” Yona peeked around the large head of the calliston at the diminutive Beva.

“I saw how Eldola attacked those deer a few days ago. Now he has a name he is our family. I know he will protect me.” The small girl leant her head on the huge face of the calliston as they walked, and he rumbled softly. Yona shook her head. Beva may be suffering terrible nights at the moment, plagued by nightmares, but when the sun shone, she was a little beacon of hope for them all.

The Pharsil-Hin had been in the hills for two months, they said, and their village was well organised. They had built large, round, hide-covered homes, and small pens where goats were being kept for milking, while others were grazing free around the hillside. Yona thought there must be about sixty nomads here; a small group of families with some elders and even a couple of babes-in-arms. Eldola took a long drink from the stream that ran through the middle of the temporary village, then settled down, eyeing a pen of goats with interest.

“He is hungry,” said Han-so-Terena. “We shall roast him a goat.”

“He hasn’t eaten much,” said Yona. “We were fed by some people at a village north of here, but he didn’t eat.”

“They eat like dragons,” explained the warrior. “We will give him plenty.”

“You are so kind. I don’t understand why,” said Yona, leaving the calliston to dream about his dinner. “You don’t know who we are.”

“You are slaves. Many of our kin have been captured and are enslaved in Wessen in the mines. One day we will free them. For now, we will feed you, for you are their kindred. Where are you heading?”

“The Kelaine hills, we think.” Yona smiled a little in embarrassment. “It’s becoming a complicated story, but we are more following Eldola than he following us.”

“Eldola? I am pleased he has a name. I have heard of dummerholes, but I did not know any existed still. It is good that he has a name and such a good one. We will tell the Draig yr Anialr of him, and tell them he has a name. Come, I will introduce you to my mate, and you can tell us your complicated story, and we will tell you some of ours.”

The Pharsil-Hin opened all their homes to Yona’s people, and each stayed in one of the hide houses under a blanket that night. Beva slept cuddled tightly next to Yona, and for the first time had a trouble-free night. In the morning, they were given a porridge of cereal and fermented goats milk, and Han-so-Terena helped Beak improve his map.

“There is no road through here,” he told them. “To our east are the Eastern Plains. When you reach the river Al-ne-Kelaine, you will cross one of the few roads. It is a trade road from An-Hellern, the seat of the Keffra-See, into Desson, and is the only trade route into the southern half of the Plains. The Eastern Plains is a troubled land and those that trade together also sometimes fight each other. The Pharsil-Hin are often attacked by the Keffra-See as we travel, and the Draig yr Anialr with their riders help to protect us. This has been true for hundreds of years.”

“Do you know this village of the callistons?” asked Beak. “I remember it from my travels many years ago, I believe. I found ruins in the Kelaine hills and I think that must be the place, though I didn’t know what it was.”

“It is,” confirmed the nomad. “We in the So tribe sometimes hunt in the hills and we know them well. I do not know how long it has been abandoned, but it is nothing more than a few broken walls now.”

“That is how I remember it too. Yona is certain that Eldola is heading there.”

“I believe she is right. As far as we know from our tribal memory, that was the only Calliston village in this part of Bind, most being much farther west. I see no other reason why your friend should be coming here.”

Yona looked up at the sun. “We should go soon,” she said. “We are all so very grateful for your kindness. We have been so cruelly treated, and yet in the last few days we have met two peoples who have put their daily lives aside for us.”

“As I told you yesterday, you are kin to our kin enslaved. We would celebrate your freedom. Now, we must also arm you, as much as we can. Where your friend is taking you is most beautiful, but you will need to hunt and there may be other dangers, as with anywhere on Dirt. The Keffra-See have no interest in the hills, but you should still be wary of them. None of you will ever be able to pull our great bows, but we have a few smaller bows and shafts that we can offer you.” The nomad stood and took them to the village centre where others of the So tribe were sorting out bows, some knives, and an impressive heap of thick but soft hides. Yona, who could not use a bow, went to help pack their few things and check on Beva and the other children who were playing with Eldola.

Phoran looked at the pile of hides. “This is too much, Han-so-Terena,” he exclaimed.

“The winds and cold at night are as much of an enemy as any man, Phoran,” explained the nomad. “The hides are your weapon against that foe. Now, we would see which of you can use a bow, make sure you are armed, and we will give you a little training. We are the best archers on Dirt.” It was not a boast but a simple statement of fact, as with all their conversation. Phoran did not doubt for a moment it was true.

Five of the former slaves stepped forward and were given bows, and the nomads helped them with their skills. All could shoot and two of them with some expertise.

“You are not a bowman?” Han-so-Terena asked Beak. “That surprises me.”

“Yes, I can use a bow. If we need, I will use one.”

“Please, select one and we shall see how well you shoot. You look stronger than the others.” Beak had lost much weight during his incarceration and, unknown to the others, his treatment when first captured had been particularly cruel, but the wiry muscles on his small frame had somehow kept their strength.

“It’s alright; I know how to fire a bow.”

“Please, this is important,” insisted the nomad.

“I only use one when I really have to,” the small man protested angrily, turning away. The tall nomad grabbed him by an arm, stopping him

“I suspect you have some skill, but if others do not know how skilled you are, then how are they to know how to fight? Each warrior must understand the skills of the others; this is the only true way to win a battle.”

“You do not understand,” growled Beak.

“I only understand your need now, friend. I have no need to understand the trials of your past.”

Beak spun around, pulling his arm free, and snatched up a bow. Without taking his eyes from the nomad he notched two arrows at once and sent them dead centre into the farthest target. The Nomad raised an eyebrow and bowed a little.

“You are truly an exceptional archer. You should not hide it.” He looked at the simple bow that Beak had used, and then pulled a beautiful longbow from his back. It was not one of their great bows, but it was powerful, and wonderfully made. “Here, this is more suited for you I think, warrior.” He handed the bow over to the speechless man and walked to the others to offer a little more instruction. Beak stared at the wondrous weapon in his hands.

“What the hell was that about, Beak?” hissed Phoran. Beak shook his head slightly. “Tell me, or tell Yona. I can see you are fond of her.”

Beak looked up at the tall man. One of the tribal women had applied an ointment to Phoran’s scarred back the previous night and he was standing straighter and stronger today. “Your Yona is like my sister of many years ago. Nothing more.”

“And the reluctance to fire a bow?”

“My father was a cruel man who beat my mother. I killed him with his own bow when I was fifteen to save her life, but she never forgave me. After I lost my own family, I spent most of my life as a mercenary, killing for coin until I was sick of the death. I use a bow because I am good with one, but I hate them too.” He looked at the beautiful bow again, then put it over his shoulder. “Am I too old to change, Phoran?”

“You have decided to stay at the calliston village when we get there, haven’t you,” said Phoran to Yona as they left the nomad village on the back of the calliston.

“I shouldn’t have decided that on my own, and we will ask the others when we get there. I am sorry, my love.”

“No, don’t be. Your large friend needs a home and I do not think the cliffs and sea of our home would suit him well. You need a home too.”

“We have our village. Isn’t that our home?” Yona was feeling guilty, but for some reason, the place of her birth seemed even farther away now, even though they were heading south towards it.

“It is, but I think that has changed.” Phoran looked back along the hide where their friends, their new villagers, were sitting, now well rested, though still weak. The calliston was wide with a long, long back, but there was not enough room for them all and they were huddled together. “Home is where your people are. These are your people now.”

“And you?”

“I have always been your people!” The tall man grinned.

Yona loved him so much that sometimes it hurt. They had always known each other of course, as their fishing village was small, and they had been in their teens when they first walked along the cliffs, bathing in the warm wind from the Missing Sea, and had decided to try kissing. They had been in love ever since.

“I do not know about Beak, though. I am not sure he can settle.”

“I believe he wants to,” said Phoran. “But I think he may be too set in his ways. Is he really so old? His face looks old, but watching him with a bow, I just cannot believe it.”

“I spoke to Golla when we left Markon Vale. She says he really is that old. Called him a long-lived, though I am not sure exactly what that means. I think he will stay a while, and we desperately need him. He is the strongest of us.”

“No, he isn’t,” said Phoran with a smile. Yona braced herself for some more praise she was fairly certain she didn’t deserve. “That would be our big friend here!” Phoran patted Eldola on the neck and was rewarded with a grunt of annoyance. Yona roared with laughter and gave her man a very wet and thoroughly embarrassing kiss.

Although they were now much clearer about the route, Yona still felt they were in the hands of the large calliston as he carefully made his way down from the hills to the heathlands below and set off southeast, almost as if he had been part of the map discussions. The previous night he had eaten two roasted goats which had been flavoured with herbs and bulbs of garlic, and Beva had been left giggling as he rumbled and almost hummed as he ate. It was a small reminder that his kind was intelligent and cultured, and not merely another beast of the plain or the forest. Sometimes Yona wished he was not from such a background as it made his life seem so much harsher.

The land here was flatter than it had been since they crossed the Cor-En, and as it neared dusk Beak called out that he could see where the tributary of the Al-ne-Kelaine that they had been following for the past few hours met the main river. Almost at once Eldola slowed down, hesitant of another river crossing.

“We will stop here for the night then cross in the morning,” Yona called up to Beak, as she leapt down from the calliston and ran to his head to tell him to stop. As she patted her friend on the cheek to thank him, from behind her, she heard a shout, and she spun around to see eight horsemen charging towards them.

“Keffra!” shouted Beak. “Get you bows out,” he ordered the other five archers, and quickly swung the beautiful nomad bow off his shoulders. Standing straight on Eldola’s back, he nocked an arrow, holding five more in his right hand.

“Everyone off!” shouted Yona, looking around wildly. “Daintine, take the children behind those rocks!” The woman grabbed Beva and the other two young children and pulled them towards a small formation of rocks that rose out from the river bank, but Beva struggled from her grasp and ran back and grabbed Eldola’s head.

“Beva, go with her!” said Yona.

“No! He will protect me!” she shouted back. “I will protect him.”

Before Yona had a chance to argue further, Beak started loosing his arrows, telling the others to wait until the horsemen were closer. The Keffra spread out in a long line, drew evil, curved swords, and shouted in high-pitched wails as they bore down on their quarry.

“What do they want?” shouted Phoran, gripping a long staff that one of the nomads had given him.

“Slaves,” shouted Beak. “They want to take us as slaves.”

“How do you know?” shouted Yona as Beak ordered the others to start firing.

“Because I’ve fought them before,” he growled.

“Within seconds the horsemen were upon them, and Eldola backed away in fright, whimpering as the former slaves fought the experienced Keffra warriors. Beak and the others jumped down from the calliston’s back and charged into the battle, trying to beat back the horsemen. Beva, trying to hold onto the calliston suddenly tripped and fell on her face, leaving her exposed. One of the horsemen stood up in his stirrups, aiming his bow at the little girl. Yona shrieked in fear and charged at his horse.

Then, from behind them came a huge roar, and the powerful calliston leapt forward, his great, clawed front feet landing either side of the small girl protectively. The horseman tried to slash at

the calliston, but Eldola smashed his head into the man, sending him flying and broken from his horse.

Yona was desperately trying to unseat another horseman when she felt a slice across her arm. She jumped back in agony, crashing into Phoran, and the blood flowed from a vicious wound. Beak saw she was wounded and his eyes darkened. Standing right in the middle of the fight, he grabbed his bow again, and at point-blank range, killed two horsemen instantly. The remaining Keffra, realising they had lost the fight, pulled back, turned their horses, and galloped east. Two of the other archers, taking Beaks cue, killed two more of their number. As the Keffra rode into the distance, Eldola rose up high onto his hind legs and bellowed across the plain in defiance and fear.

Beak looked up at him. "Got you!" he said in understanding, and he leant back and loosed two more arrows high and fast, one after the other, and felled the last two horsemen.

Yona turned to look for Beva and for a moment could not see her. And then she looked up and put her hand to her mouth. Eldola, still raised up high, was cradling the girl in his arms. He slowly lowered her to the ground and stroked her face. She was shaking and quivering, and the tears were flowing down her dirty cheeks. Yona wrapped her in her arms. She looked up at the big, beautiful face of the calliston, not bowed down as he normally was, but raised up proudly.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for protecting her." To her amazement, the massive creature looked down at her and bowed his head, just a little, and blinked at her. He had understood.

They lit a large fire that night and cooked a stew from the meat the Pharsil-Hin had supplied them. The nomads had not just given them hides and bows, but two pots, large spoons, and a couple of knives for cooking. It was a generous gift, but Yona realised as she sorted through the bag of bits which included tools to work the ground, it was so much more than it looked. With these few carefully chosen items, the nomads had given them the chance to survive.

Beak seemed almost angry as he stitched and bandaged Yona's arm properly after they had eaten. All of them involved in the fight had injuries, but her wound was the worst, and she had left it till everyone else was tended.

"You are their leader," he snapped at her. "You are not meant to get killed."

"I am not the leader!" she protested.

"Yes, you are. Who else is there?"

"Phoran? Hekon? Daintine? You even!"

"Not me!" he growled angrily. "And not the others, either. Why do you think they are all here? I heard you and Phoran talking and he is right. They are your people now."

Yona fell quiet for a moment and then looked up at Beak. "You are not going to stay, are you."

"I will for a bit, but after that, I don't know." He shrugged. "Does it matter?"

He had asked her that before when she had asked his age. She wasn't going to back down this time. "Yes, it does!" she barked.

"Why?" His eyes were cold and his voice hard. "Why is it so important, girl?"

Yona raised her hand and slapped him around the face, hard. "Because I need you, you selfish bastard. I need a father!" Yona opened her eyes wide, shocked at what she had just said, then grabbed the cloth from him and stalked into the dark, finishing the dressing herself. Phoran came and sat down next to the stunned man.

“We both lost our families. Well, I didn’t have many to lose, but she lost her father and her uncle and her mother in the same boat when she was ten, the same age as Beva. I have been her brother, her friend, her lover and every member of her family I could think of being, but there was one person I have never managed to replace; her father.”

“Not her mother?” asked Beak, quietly.

“Her mother was a bitter, uncaring woman. She was never cruel and never hurt Yona, but I am not sure she loved her that much either. Yona’s father doted on her. He taught her to tie nets, plane wood, grow vegetables. Taught her everything he knew about horses and other animals, all when she was very young. After he died, neighbours took her in and they were very kind to her. They fed her and loved her, and the woman taught her to read and write, but they were not like her father.”

“I am not like her father either.”

“Yes you are. Very like him. Or you would be if you were not insisting on living in the past!” Phoran stood and followed after Yona. He really liked Beak, and he knew what Yona saw in him, and knew she needed him, but at that moment, he could easily have punched him.

Eldola was all but dancing from foot to foot the following morning, but between him and the Kelaine hills lay the river Al-ne-Kelaine, and Yona could see it was troubling him. Although it looked shallower than the river Cor-En, it was still a briskly moving obstacle that was going to be difficult for the humans to cross at this spot without the help of the Calliston. It would be safer if they could cross without riding him in case he panicked again. Phoran had suggested they scout upstream for a league or two with the Keffra horses, looking for a shallower stretch where at least the humans could cross separately, but Yona was worried the big animal would refuse to head west, away from the hills.

“He will follow you,” said Beak, walking up to her and wiping down his bow.

“Are you talking to me this morning?” asked Yona. She felt guilty for hitting him the previous evening, but she was still a little angry at him too.

Beak ignored her question. “I think you will have to walk with him, but he will follow. Take Beva with you as well. He is very protective of her.”

“I know he understands more than we think he should, but I am not sure if that makes a huge difference here.”

“Protecting Beva like he did? That was more than the action of a mother bear or Oothen. He knew I had to stop them.”

Yona turned to Beak. “Why did you kill the last two? They were running away.”

“We can’t risk them coming back. That was the only reason. They will be missed, I have no doubt, and four of their horses ran towards the Plains, but if they come looking for them, they won’t know what happened.”

“Are you going on the scout?”

“Yes. I am taking Daintine as she is the only person other than you, Phoran, and Beva who can ride. You need to stay here with the others. There is no way Beva is going, and Phoran is still in too much pain to ride properly.”

“That fight took it out of him,” commented Yona. “He is not showing it, but he was hit round the back and two of his cuts opened again. I must find some more of the fillenton herb that Golla used to keep the infection away. I might send a couple out searching while you scout; we are going to need it to help with the next batch of scratches and cuts.”

Beak smiled. “You never stop thinking about people, do you.”



“Isn’t that what everyone does?”

“In my experience, not really.” Beak walked back to where they had tethered their four new horses, and he and Daintine galloped off west up the river, Eldola watching them go.

The place they found was only a league away, but it wasn’t a huge improvement over where they had started. It was a little wider and shallower for most of the way across, and using a rope that they had been given by the nomads, they managed to get everyone to the south bank, the three children carried by Hekon and Beak. Now it was up to Yona to get the calliston across, and he was already upset.

“Come on, Eldola,” Yona said pleadingly, standing in front of his big head. “You are going to have to carry me, dear friend. Will you cross without me guiding you?” They still had no idea how Tekkinmod’s men had guided the calliston, but they suspected it was cruel. Beva had spotted scarring on the rear of the beast when they had removed his hide back at the nomad’s camp.

Eldola grumbled and ducked his head down and up impatiently. He so obviously wanted to cross, but he was scared. Yona had hoped that seeing the humans and horses cross first would help, but it seemed to have made no difference.

“Right, dear one, I cannot wait any longer. So, I am sorry about this!” She stroked his cheek, which always made him lower his big head and as soon as he did, she grabbed his ear. Immediately he tried to pull away. “No!” she said firmly. “Come on!” She pulled him towards the bank, and Eldola, grumbling under his breath, followed as slowly as he could. “Come on, right up to the water.”

Daintine and Beak had chosen this place because the banks were beach-like, covered with small stones, and so it was a gentle slope into the water, not a sudden step, at least on this side. The second half was deeper and that is where they had used the rope. They were not sure how deep it was, but deep enough that none could touch the bottom, including the horses, and they had all dragged themselves across using the rope. They had now removed the line so it was not in the way, and Yona had no choice but to cross on the calliston. She was hoping she could get at least halfway across without climbing up on his back, but she knew it was dangerous. If he panicked, he might crush her by accident.

“That’s right, put your toes in the water.” It was ridiculous treating him like a child, but with all his grunts and grumbling, he sounded like one, albeit a very big one. Reluctantly, Eldola walked into the water, his claws curling up and gripping the stones as if he was scared of being washed away. In truth, if he fell, he was more likely to dam the river than float off. “Follow me, come on!” The big calliston huffed and puffed, and Yona rolled her eyes. “Alright then, baby calliston!” She smiled and started to sing as she guided him deeper into the river.

*I went to harbour  
To buy some fresh fish,  
To make a fine supper  
For my lover’s dish.*

*I spoke to the men  
Who came in from the sea,  
Who smiled at me gently,  
And caught some for me.*

*I walked by the shore  
Looking for some green weed,  
To steam the fresh fish  
As my mother taught me.*

*I danced in the waves,  
Let them play with my toes,  
Clean my fair skin,  
Wash away my woes.*

*I went to our home,  
My lover to hold,  
But the table was empty,  
And the fire was cold.*

*I ran to the boat yard  
And cried on the pier,  
For my lover was gone,  
Now I only had tears.*

*I sat at my table  
Eating all of the fish,  
But it tasted of nothing  
Without my lover's dish.*

By the last verse, she and the calliston had reached the middle of the river. Now the water was up to her waist and she waded to the side of him, climbed up on his back and then high on his neck. Leaning down on the top of his head she kissed him once and looked up to see Beva standing near the river bank. Yona waved and Beva waved back.

“Come on, Eldola. For me. Run to Beva!”

The calliston took a long, nervous breath, then suddenly he raised up on his hind legs, lifting her high into the air, and plunged into the deep water with a roar, powering his way across. Stride after stride he pushed his way into the current while Beva danced and screamed and waved, and Yona hung on to his head. The water was much deeper than she thought, and his head suddenly pushed beneath the surface, nearly washing her away. But he pulled it back up, spluttering, and growling, and heaved his way on towards the cheering girl. And then he made it. He leapt up on to the far bank and the young girl ran up to him, hugging his head and kissing him all over his soft nose.

Yona, soaked through, lay between his ears, gasping for breath as Beak and Phoran ran over.

“I thought I had lost you!” shouted Phoran.

Beak bounded up onto Eldola's back and helped the bedraggled young woman down. Yona sat on the ground with a thump and held out her hand to the great animal. With a small whimper, Eldola reached over with his hand and held hers.

“We did it! You did it,” she said, and smiled so widely that Phoran fell to his knees and kissed her.

“Yes, you did it, girl,” Beak said quietly from behind her. “Come on Beva,” he called over. “I know everything is soaking, but we should head away from here quickly, then we can dry off. Go and round them all up.” Beva made a silly little bow in his direction, and rushed off to tell the others to get everything together quickly.

Eldola walked rather than trotted for the next couple of hours while Beak and Daintine rode on ahead to find somewhere to camp. Although they were not far from the old calliston village now, Yona thought it better to do the remaining leagues the following day in case they had trouble finding the right valley. Beak had admitted that it was twenty or more years since he had been here, and his memory of the area wasn't that good. She had expected the calliston to be more frantic as he had been the day before, but she now wondered if he was nervous. She knew there were no callistons here, but they did not know whether he knew this or not. The nomads suspected that he might have been captured while the callistons were moving, perhaps having already abandoned the village, or following an attack when all callistons were killed. If either of these were so, he might remember there would be no one here. She found it difficult to understand. Whatever had happened, it would have been several centuries back, far beyond the memory of any except the dragons or one of the mythical magicians that were meant to be around. Golla had said that she only knew of two other calliston communities in Bind, and they were to the west. It all worried Yona.

They camped in the woods that ran along the western flank of the Kelaine hills, just by a small brook. They had spotted some small woodland boar earlier, and Phoran sent out the archers hunting while some of the others foraged for roots and berries.

“Yona, can I ask you something?” asked Beva, as the young woman loosened the straps of the hide covering the calliston. It was still wet, and she wanted to dry it properly. He shook once as she undid the last buckle and the huge hide slid to the ground. Two of the other women pulled it out flat to dry.

“Are you alright, Beva?”

“Can I talk about my mum?”

“If you want.”

“I know we had to leave her behind in the room.” The small girl looked down at her feet. “I know she is dead, but what do you think has happened to her; to her body?”

Yona sighed. They had left them all in the room, laid out by the cold cliff wall. They had had no choice, and it seemed so long ago even though it was only ten days.

“I don't know, Beva. They will bury them, I would think.”

“They won't mark the graves or anything, will they.”

“No, I don't think they will.”

The small girl reached under her shirt and pulled out a simple pendant. “This is my mum's, Yona. She asked me to hold it in case the men took it from her. She would have liked this place, with the little brook and the small trees. Our village was like this. Will you help me bury it here?” Small tears were running down the girl's face.

“Oh, Beva,” said Yona, kneeling and holding the girl's hands. “Wouldn't you prefer to keep it, or bury it where we are going?”

“No. I have my own pendant that she gave me as a present. I want to keep that because she gave it to me when she was happy. She gave me this when she was sad. I want to bury it somewhere peaceful where it will never be dug up or anything.”

Yona nodded. “Alright, come on.”

She took a shovel from their belongings, and they walked through the trees and up the hill a little way until they reached a quiet glade where the brook bubbled and played across the mossy stones. Beva found a place by a rock, and Yona took the shovel and dug a hole. The girl balled up the simple pendant and chain, put it in the hole, and put a small flat stone on top of it. Yona then filled it in and Beva placed several more stones as a marker. She then kissed her own hand and laid it on top of the rocks.

“Goodbye, Mummy,” she whispered, then threw herself into Yona’s arms, and sobbed while the young woman carried her back down the hill to the camp. They all had so much pain, thought Yona. Perhaps it was not so wrong to try and leave a little of it behind in a quiet, beautiful place such as this.

Eldola stood absolutely still. The breeze blew softly through the small, shallow valley, lifting a little dust here and there where it had collected between the ancient, fallen stone walls. Yona stood beside him and held his large, clawed hand by a finger. It was just the two of them, and the others were waiting a quarter of a league back. She had decided it was better this way as none of them knew what would happen. Beak had scouted for the valley first and had found it quicker than he thought he would. The calliston let go of her hand and walked slowly into the valley, sniffing the air a little. He pushed at one of the small walls and a couple of the large stones slid to the ground, making him flinch backwards a step. Yona let him look around on his own.

The calliston continued to make his way along one side of the valley, pushing his way past the odd small tree that blocked his way. Yona could not even begin to imagine how much it must have changed in three, perhaps four hundred years. They had no idea how old Eldola was, and he might even be older. Callistons live up to eight hundred years, though dummerholes not so long, Golla had said. None of these trees here would have existed back then, and the wind would have eroded and changed the valley, as would have the rare rains. The small walls were all that was left of the great stone and wood calliston houses.

Eldola crossed the stream that ran through the valley out to the Eastern Plains, and made his way slowly back down the opposite side as Yona walked towards him. Suddenly, he stopped, and with a large foot scraped at the ground by a broken wall. He looked down and then scraped again. And then he became more frantic, the massive beast scraping away at the dirt desperate with his hands. He stopped again and looked down at something. With a sad, childlike whimper, he lay his head on the ground. Yona rushed over to him to see what he had found. By his head lay a stone that must have once been part of the wall. On it were carved a few words in ancient Adelan.

*Met sele tolothia ire eafor.*

She had to think really hard to try and work out the meaning in a language long dead now, but a little of which she had learned as a child. As she worked through the words, she started to shake, and the tears ran down her face. She fell against the calliston’s head and cried as all her pain rose up and engulfed her.

Phoran and the others found her two hours later, huddled by the still whimpering calliston next to the ancient stone. Yona had stopped crying, but her cheeks were stained with dirty tears and her eyes were red and lost.

“Yona, what’s happened?” asked Phoran gently, brushing the hair from her face. “Is this his village?”

She nodded and pointed to the stone.

“What is it?”

“He found it,” she said, her voice hoarse from crying. “He dug it up.”

“Can you read it? You know I don’t read.”

Yona started crying again, clinging onto the huge beast.

“I can read it,” said Beak gently. Phoran looked up at him, puzzled. Beak shrugged. So few could read the ancient languages, but his past was complicated, more than he would admit. He knelt down next to Phoran and Yona and took the young woman’s hand in his own. “Girl,” he said as if speaking to his child. “This is his home, isn’t it?” She nodded.

“What does it say?” asked Phoran.

“Our son’s small house.”

Eldola, the great calliston, took a long breath, then breathed out a single word, the first he had spoken since he was a child. “Home.”

## The Vale

Beva sat on a small hill looking over the valley, Eldola resting peacefully next to her. It should have been such an ordinary, picturesque scene of a young girl sitting next to her favourite animal friend, a puppy perhaps, or a furry welton kitten, but the animal friend in question was so big, and the young girl was much smaller than just one of his front legs. Yet, here they sat looking over the valley while the girl chatted constantly and drew her village plan on a piece of wood with a burnt stick.

“Your house will be easy. Yona says we must build it exactly where your old one was, but she says it will have to be much, much, much, much bigger. You were very little when you were here. Mr Beak has measured it and says it is only ten paces long. That is only big enough for your tail now!” She had marked a square on her plan with a nose sticking out one end and a long tail the other. Callistons didn’t have very long tails, not like dragons, but the girl was nothing if not imaginative. Eldola just rumbled happily.

In the last week, the twenty villagers, Eldola among their number, had cleared a camping ground along the sparkling stream that ran through the small valley and then headed north-east across the Eastern Plains to join the great River Al-ne-Kelaine. No one knew whether this clean, fresh, tributary had a name, so they had named it themselves in the manner of the desert peoples; Fe-hen-Kelaine, child of the Kelaine hills. Beak and Daintine had made a very quick survey of the area and sketched out a rough map. The Kelaine hills were a long ridge that ran along the western border of the Eastern Plains for some one hundred leagues, Beak reckoned from memory, divided nearly halfway down by a group of lower, gentle hills. Their valley was within this region and though not especially secluded or hidden, they had found no roads other than the main route where they had crossed the Al-ne-Kelaine. They had seen a few small, plains deer, some smart, wild goats, which they had yet to catch, and a fierce, angry boar that lived in the sparse forests in the hills. For the moment, it was enough to keep them fed, but if they were to stay here, they needed to be certain that they could farm, build, and grow, not just survive. They had decided to make camp to give them time to rest, hunt, and survey. Tonight, they would decide whether they would stay or move farther south.

“I am not sure where I want my house,” said Beva, making a few squiggles to represent the larger trees. “I think Mummy Yona will want to live with Phoran as I think she likes him. So, do I live with Yona or have my own house?” She looked at the huge calliston who she had decided was her best friend. “I could live with you, but I’m worried about getting squashed.”

Eldola rumbled softly.

“Alright, I will stay with Yona then. I think she will like that. Will Phoran like that?” Despite the enforced closeness of the journey and the comradeship of the last week, Beva was still a little confused by some of the relationships. She was missing her real mother a lot, which is why she was spending every waking moment with the huge calliston, talking non-stop, rather

than with the other two children who still had their mothers. On the first day after their arrival, with Yona desperately worried whether Eldola would want to stay in the empty valley of his birth, Beva had sneaked onto his back without asking and he had carried her up to the hilltops on his own. Beak, usually so in command of himself, had chased after them on a horse in a panic, but then had seen that the huge animal was going exactly where Beva was telling him, so he backed off and just watched from a distance.

“Do you want a wooden house or a stone house? Phoran says that we can use some of the stone blocks from the old village, but Hekon says some are very big and heavy. I think you can lift them, but I don’t know how to tell you to. Yona thinks you understand a lot of what we say, but you get confused. I get confused a lot too, especially with that oldy language that we keep finding on stones. Is that your language? Did you speak oldy-Adelan when you were a little... what are little callistons called?”

As Beva chatted on, Eldola lifted his head slightly and looked down to the east end of the valley. With a rumble, he rose to his feet.

“You jogged me!” complained Beva, rubbing out the errant line that she had drawn by mistake. Eldola harrumphed, reached down, and picked the small girl up, then, ignoring her protests, pushed her up onto his shoulders. “What are you doing? It is not lunchtime yet!” The huge animal huffed at her and headed quickly back down into the valley and trotted across to where Yona was sitting on one of the horses. The horse flinched backwards as the huge animal ground to a halt. Since arriving in the valley, the calliston had changed considerably. He now always had his head held high, and his eyes were bright and questioning.

“What is it Beva?” asked Yona.

“I don’t know!” the young girl called down from the beast’s shoulders. “He just picked me up and ran down here. I think he’s seen something.”

Eldola rumbled and raised himself up, looking down the valley. He seemed to be trying to say something, but all he managed was a few mumbles. Yona didn’t think he sounded frightened or worried, but she turned her horse to see what he was he was looking at. Beak trotted over, seeing the odd behaviour of the calliston.

“What’s happening?” he asked, pulling his bow instinctively.

“I’m not sure. I think he has spotted someone. He brought Beva back without her asking.”

“He has better eyesight than us, I noticed.” Beak turned to the calliston, reaching up for one of his big hands. Eldola, without taking his eyes from the end of the valley, grabbed the man by the arm and pulled him up onto his back.

“He is changing so fast,” commented Yona. “Can you see anything?”

“Yes. It’s a group of men, I think.” Beak was straining to see. “No horses. I think they might be Pharsil-Hin.”

“Are you sure?”

“No, they are too far away. Go and fetch Phoran and the others.”

Yona turned her horse and rode off to gather those that were closest, telling the few archers to fetch their bows. When they returned, the nomads appeared through the trees, moving gracefully and easily, and strode up to them. There were ten of them; six of the tall warriors and four women.

“Mena-Yona,” said one of the warriors to the young woman, still sitting on her horse. “I am Kie-so-Marena. We are travelling south and Han-so-Terena asked that we should find you to see if you survive.”

Yona smiled warmly and climbed down from the horse. "Thank you. Will you stay and eat with us? We have a boar we are cooking for lunch."

The tall warrior bowed. "We will happily share your hunting. Please, our wives will help."

Yona had noticed that the women had a slightly second-class role in nomad society when they had met them in the Kerron Hills, but also that they could be quite bossy, which she liked.

"Beva, climb down and take our friends up to the camp, will you?"

"Yes, Mummy Yona!"

Yona winced. Beva had started calling her that as soon as they had arrived at the village and she was not totally sure what she felt about it yet. At only twenty-six, she felt that big sister Yona might have been better.

"You have camped well," said the tall warrior, strolling alongside Yona and Beak. "I see you have horses."

"We were attacked by the Keffra on the way here," explained Beak. "Just by the river."

"Did you kill them all?" asked the nomad.

"Yes. We had to."

"Good. They will not know you are here for a time, I think," said Kie-so-Marena. "You will stay, Mena-Yona?" Mena meant mother in the old desert tongue and the Pharsil-Hin men often used it for a woman who had higher status than perhaps they were used to.

"We will decide this evening between us all. We have been trying to find out more about this valley and the hills, but with so very few of us, we have not been able to sit and exchange all we have learned yet."

The warrior looked thoughtful for a moment. "We were to travel on today, but it is not necessary," he said. "We will stay with you tonight and tell you more about the peoples of the plains, of hunting, of the seasons, and of the forests and hills. Although we are nomads, we are cautious about where we camp, and I understand your concern. You are right to debate this by a fire."

"Thank you," said Yona. "The Pharsil-Hin have been very kind, and your knowledge will be welcomed."

"Let us join your people," said the nomad. "The women have brought a gift for you, mother." He lengthened his stride, leaving Yona standing by the river with a stunned expression on her face. Beak grinned.

"Did you not know what Mena meant?"

"No!" She glared at him. "But you did. How much else do you know that you are not telling me, again?"

Beak sighed, knowing what was really going on. "Are you going to force me to stay?"

"Is there no other way?"

"No."

"Then yes, I will."

Beak twisted his mouth, and then, most uncharacteristically, he took the young woman's arm. "Then yes, I will stay." He started walking towards the camp. "But you even once call me father, uncle, or any other ridiculous title, and I will leave the next day. Deal?"

"Deal."

The gift was a rug and a knife. The women told Yona she was head of her tribe and when at the fire, she should sit on the rug. The knife was symbolic. Women, they told her, were cherished and protected by the men of the Pharsil-Hin. Sometimes, they explained, they can be



overprotective. These small knives with delicate engravings were given to women who were forced to take on what was seen as a man's role. It was always given by other women and was a sign of strength. The women had laughed, and Toli-so-Fina, Kie-so-Marena's wife, had said that should a man tell her that as a woman she could not make important decisions, then she could stab him with the knife. Yona decided that the Pharsil-Hin's idea of humour was a little different from hers.

"I am worried about trade most of all," said Phoran as they all gathered around the warm fire. This had been a constant discussion over the week. "I know we have nothing to trade at the moment, and no coin at all, but eventually we must trade, and we are a long way from other communities."

"We have horses," pointed out Hekon. "But we don't have wagons or a cart. I know how to make one, but I need more tools and the wheels need iron on these rough hills."

"You are not as far from trade as you believe, Phoran," said Kie-so-Marena. "You are on the border of Desson, and though many are in the West of the country, there are farms and tiny communities not many leagues from here."

"What have we around here they would trade?" asked Yona.

"Hide has always been an important trade for us," said the nomad. "The sun of the plains is excellent for drying and you will be able to produce fine tanned hides, staked out to dry on the hilltops."

"Do we not need salt?" asked Phoran. As coastal people, they had always used salt for curing.

"We can teach you how to tan the hides using the brains of the animal," said Toli-so-Fina cheerfully, followed by a sound of disgust from Beva.

"Well, that is one thing we can look to do," said Phoran.

"There are other items you can trade," said Toli-so-Fina. "Things we do not. Because we are nomadic, we grow few crops, only those that grow quickly. There are peppers that grow in these hills that you can either harvest or cultivate. Some are very hot and are much favoured."

"We used to buy pepper oil in our village," said Daintine. "Only a little, because it was very expensive."

"Some of the larger villages and towns in Desson would certainly buy pepper oil," said Kie-so-Marena. "You have clay in the hills to the south here and to the north. I saw how much stone you have. Could you build a kiln? I am sorry, I know nothing of pottery as we buy what we need."

"I know how to make pots," said Merra, the mother of one of the other children. "We lived near a small clay pit and my mother made pots and bottles."

"Would you buy pottery from us?" Yona asked the nomads. Kie-so-Marena looked to the women who all nodded.

"We can trade pottery for many things. Especially if you make small jars that are suitable for travelling," said Toli-so-Fina with a chuckle. "We break quite a few when journeying across the plains. My husband is exceptionally clumsy!" The nomad women laughed at the expense of their men.

Yona, sitting on her rug, looked around at this mixed group and then over to the large callistion who was sleeping peacefully on the edge of the firelight.

"We have all spoken much tonight and I think everyone has been very honest," she said. "We still need to make the decision to stay or not, though I know some have made up their minds already." She smiled, looking over to Beva, who had been showing everyone her plan for her

village all afternoon. "But there are so few of us that it is a very hard decision. Please, we must choose."

Yona picked up a pot and passed it around the fire. Each of them had a short stick and a longer stick. The short stick was to stay and the long stick was to move on. Even the three children had been given a choice. As the pot was passed around, the nomads stood quietly and moved away from the fire. This was not their decision to make.

When the pot had finished its journey, Yona emptied it by her feet and sorted through the sticks. She sighed and then smiled. "We stay. You all chose to stay."

"Eldola didn't choose!" said Beva suddenly, and she rushed over to the big calliston, pulling his ear to wake him up. "Eldola! We are choosing to live here or go somewhere else. What do you choose?"

The calliston lifted a dozy head and looked at the small girl, putting his head on one side.

"Do you want to live here with us?" she asked slowly, looking suddenly frightened about what the reply might be.

Eldola looked at her and frowned. In the last week, in his slow, tired head, he had felt something lift from him. Vague memories of hundreds of years before had been drifting through his mind. Not all were welcome, and some were terrible. He knew, somehow, that he was horribly damaged and was not sure really what he was or who, but some things were returning. In the very back of his mind had been a soft voice, and the image of a small, gentle, white dragon. The voice had been patiently encouraging him league after league, day after day, and slowly, a little of the calliston of old had reawakened. He looked around at his friends, all turned towards him, watching the small girl standing in front of him biting her lip, and he felt warmth and comfort. Reaching out, he pulled the girl close and using the few words he had been trying to remember while sitting on the hill looking over the valley, he whispered to her.

"Eldola home."

Phoran held Yona close, listening to the wind blowing gently through the trees under which they lay. There was just one moon tonight, Megan Mona, the morning moon, as it was called.

"You are good with words, Yona. What are we going to call our new village?"

"I am not sure it is for me to choose," she said with a sigh. "But if it were, I would choose Dena y Draigfan. Vale of the Callistons. Eldola, as he said, is home. It is his home first, the home of his people."

"Do you think he will learn to talk more?"

"Yes, I do. Though I think it should be impossible. Something has happened to him that I do not understand, and I think I never will. Beak doesn't either and I think he is closer to understanding these things than the rest of us."

"He is staying?"

"Yes," she said, chuckling. "He got me to order him to stay!"

"He did what?"

"I think he needed it. I think he has travelled so long and has been without a family for so many years, that he did not know how to stop. He needed someone to tell him. So, I did. I am not sure how long he will stay, but it will be for a while."

Phoran smiled and stroked her head. He loved Yona more than anything, but he knew her and knew that sometimes she hid things.

"I saw the sticks when you emptied the pot," he said. "There was one long one. That was yours, wasn't it."

“Yes,” she whispered. “I knew everyone would choose to stay so I was not risking anything.”

“Why did you choose to go?”

“Oh, Phoran!” She laughed and rolled over on top of him, looking into his eyes. “I miss the sea!”

“Mum!” Beva burst in through the door of their cottage. “Mum!”

“Here, Beva. What is it?” Yona walked in from the back of the cottage where she was baking bread made from their first wheat crop.

“It’s Eldola. He is ill again.”

“Oh, no. Do you want me to come?”

“Please. He’s down by the stream.”

“He finds it cooler there. Come on.”

In the couple of years they had lived in the valley, they had changed it beyond recognition. Taking advice from their nomad friends, who had become regular visitors and had even camped with them for a few months the previous season, they had learned how to tan hides, smoke meat, make fine pottery, and were now trading with several villages in Desson. Their strings of dried peppers and pepper oil had been especially popular. Everyone now had a cottage, though admittedly very primitive, and they had built an enormous wooden shelter for their calliston friend. But in the last months, Eldola had begun to fall ill, and they had no idea what to do about it.

“Eldola, what is wrong?” asked Yona, taking his huge hand.

“I don’t know, Mena.” He had called her Mena from when he had first started to talk again. He said it was because she sang to him like he remembered his own mother singing, centuries before. They still did not know how old he was, and he could not tell them. But they knew that as dummerholes, he and his brother had been bought and sold a countless number of times, and had spent decades working in the mines of the North Hoar Ridge in freezing conditions. “I am so tired and my breath hurts.”

“I wish I knew what to give you, dear one. If you were a human I might know, but...”

“I know. I am too big.” Eldola looked over at Beva; so much more grown now. And yet, when not doing the hard chores that all in the village must do, she still spent as much time with him as possible. “Mena,” said Eldola to Yona. “I think I am dying.”

“No, why do you think that?”

“I am not sure. I tried to catch a deer today, but I could not run fast enough. My legs hurt.”

Yona stroked his face. “You are always welcome at our fire. We shall cook for you. Come. Walk up to our house and sit with us.” The great calliston nodded, and slowly followed the two humans up the northern slope of the vale to where they had built their small cottage.

Eldola was still unclear what had actually happened to him. He and Beak had spoken quietly for many hours about dummerholes before the man had left after the first year. Beak had been troubled by many memories too, and had eventually decided to leave. He had not told them where he was going, but he had hugged Yona tightly and called her daughter on the morning of his departure, and thanked her for giving him purpose again. Eldola thought that perhaps the man had not been entirely honest about his life, and that he was going to find his own family. The calliston wished he could do the same. His memories of when he was young were dreadful. He and his brother, the calliston turned into a war dummerhole, were orphaned when their village was attacked. He did not know who the raiders were though he was certain that it was

none of the desert peoples, even the Keffra-See. They had been sold to a group of men who had then maimed them. From then on, his memories were like a dense fog, and his mind had become slow and cumbersome, and he had lost all ability to speak. He also remembered being frightened all the time.

Then there was that morning when the dragons had attacked Tekkinmod's hall in the gorge. His brother had become enraged and lost all control. He did not know what had become of him, but deep inside he hoped he had not survived. His brother had always been in far more pain than he, and had suffered so terribly. And yet, for all the sadness, that morning had changed Eldola's life for the good. At the moment of his greatest fear, a soft voice had spoken to him to calm him and had asked him to wait for the slaves. Then, when they were all on his back, the voice had opened his mind just a little, had found his memory of where he was born, and told him to go home. That voice, though just a memory really, had been with him ever since, and he had used it to free his mind. Oh, he knew he could not think like a calliston should, and he had trouble following complicated conversations or if Beva spoke too fast, which was often. Callistons were good farmers, but he did not really understand how to grow things. He was powerful, though, and he had ploughed their fields, felled the bigger trees in the forests, and helped carry stone down from the hills.

As much as possible he had been independent. He insisted on hunting rather than the villagers hunting for him or feeding him from their goat herds. He had learned to cook and to forage, and had helped to build his home. The villagers treated him as one of them, and he treated them as his family, but now it was becoming too hard and he was too tired.

Yona and Beva cooked him a goat wrapped in his favourite herbs, and they and Phoran sat down by the fire outside the one-roomed cottage and talked.

"I can read every stone we have found now," said Beva. They had found many stones like the one he had first dug up, each a sign for one of the old ruined buildings.

"You are clever with words, my sister," said Eldola. He loved this small girl so much.

"I try, but I am not like mum. Or like Beak was." She twisted her nose. "I miss him."

"I do too," said Yona. "I always knew he wouldn't stay, but I wanted him to try."

"Why, mum?" asked Beva.

"Because he needed to. He has been lost or losing himself for most of his life I think. He had to stop and think for a while."

"Like me," said Eldola. "I was lost too."

"You are not now, my friend," said Phoran. "You have a family."

"I do." The Calliston stretched and rolled over onto his side. "It is a warm night and I do not need my house. Can I sleep here by yours?"

"Of course!" said Yona. "I don't have a big enough blanket for you, so I can't tuck you in."

Eldola looked puzzled and Beva shuffled over next to him and cuddled into his arms. "When I was very little, my mummy used to tuck me in when I went to sleep. She would pull the rugs over me and tuck them under so I was warm. Mummy Yona does that still sometimes. I like it!"

"It sounds very nice," said Eldola, dozing off slowly.

Over the next two months, Eldola became tired more often and could not hunt at all. He spent most of the days either in his shelter or sleeping next to Yona's cottage. Yona was desperate to do something for him, but she did not understand what was happening. Perhaps he was just old, she did not know. Beva took to telling him stories that she made up, and the other villagers came to tell him all kinds of meaningless things; what they had been doing, what they

were trading that day, anything and everything so that he knew that he was one of them. They all owed him so much. The young man had released them from the cold, dark room, but the great calliston had carried them the nearly three hundred leagues from their hell to his home, and none of them would ever forget it.

One day a shadow brushed across the valley and a great dragon landed by the stream.

The Draig yr Anialr looked at the woman standing in front of her and smiled. "I know that creature who is sleeping over there," she said. "And so, I think I know who you are too."

Yona frowned. "My name is Yona and he is Eldola."

"Old Friend?" The dragon chuckled cheekily. "He has a name now then."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Be-Elin and I was one of those who attacked Tekkinmod's hall. I watched you all escape on his back."

"You helped us." Yona nodded in understanding. "Thank you. Do you want to speak to him?"

Be-Elin blinked. "He speaks? He's a dummerhole!"

"I know, but he is more a calliston now again. We do not know why, though I think he might have an idea." Yona looked sad.

"What is it?" asked the dragon.

"He is dying, but we don't know why."

"Oh." Be-Elin looked down. "I will talk to him then. Can I do so alone?"

"If you like."

The beautiful desert dragon walked over to the huge calliston and sat by him. Gently, she touched his face and he awoke slowly.

"Cyfar Draigfan," she said.

"Cyfar Draig," he replied softly.

"You remember our language?"

"A little, I think." He sat up stiffly and blinked at the dragon. "Who are you?"

"I am Be-Elin." The dragon looked uncomfortable. "I was there in the gorge."

"Oh." Eldola reached over and took her hand. "Please, what happened to my brother?"

Be-Elin swallowed. "I am sorry. We had to kill him. He was completely maddened. It was a sad day for us all."

"I am glad. He suffered so much more than me."

"Eldola, do you remember much of before you became a dummerhole?"

The calliston smiled. "And before I became a calliston again? I remember a little."

"Do you remember your name?"

"I think if I tried I might, but I have decided not to. These are my family now and they gave me my name. That means much."

"I am amazed at you, Eldola. I have never heard of a calliston who has been ruined regaining speech. Though, I am not very old I suppose."

"Can I ask, do you know of a small, white dragon?"

"Yes, I do. She helped you rescue the slaves."

"If you see her, thank her. I think it is because of her that I can speak. Well, her and Yona."

"How has Yona helped?"

"She sings to me. She sang to me to comfort me when I was frightened after the gorge." Eldola stretched and grimaced. He was aching. "I am so ill, Be-Elin. I am dying. Do you know why I am?"

“Yes, I do.” The great dragon wrapped her long, beautiful wing round the calliston, drawing him close in a way no one else could. “You are the last calliston, Eldola.”

They spoke for several hours, but before she left, Be-Elin gave Yona the recipe for a tonic, explaining it might help take some of the pain away for Eldola. She then leapt into the air and disappeared into the sun, flying south.

Yona and Beva stayed with Eldola over the next week as he became weaker and weaker. Then he decided he wanted to climb up the small hill where he had taken Beva when they had first arrived. It was a slow journey, but he made it, insisting that Beva ride on him.

“I remember sitting here watching you draw your village plan,” he told the young girl.

“You jogged me!” she said, smiling.

“I’m sorry. I did not really understand what you were doing, not then.” He coughed and wheezed then chuckled. “I do not always understand now, but I like watching you.”

The three sat in silence in the warm sun until Eldola reached out and drew Beva to him.

“I wish to spend some time with Yona now, my friend.”

Beva looked up at him and tears flowed down her face. “Are you?”

“I want to be able to say goodbye to you like this.” He put his head against her face and rumbled fondly.

“I love you so much, Eldola,” cried Beva.

“And I love you. You are my sister.”

Beva kissed his face again and again and then fled. Running down the hill, crying and sobbing.

Eldola put his head on the ground and Yona leant against him.

“You saved me,” he said, his voice a whisper.

“You saved us.”

“I could not have done it without you. I remember those river crossings. I have never been more scared before.”

“Why were you so frightened?”

“Callistons cannot swim. None of us can.”

“You remember that?”

“No, I had to ask Be-Elin. I thought it was just me.”

“Oh!” Yona giggled. She looked across the gentle valley. “Your home is very beautiful, Eldola.”

“It is. Thank you for staying in the valley; I know you didn’t want to.”

“You did?” Yona turned to him in surprise. As much as he had recovered his speech, Eldola did not normally understand such subtlety, or so she thought.

“One day you should go home. Soon they will not need you here so much. Hekon says that some others from a village in the south are going to move here.”

“Yes, they are. There are a couple of villages that have been suffering from local bandits and a lack of rain. Forty people. Our village is going to triple in size!”

“That is good. It is a little too small I think at the moment. When they are settled, then you should go back to the sea.”

“I cannot. What about Beva?”

Eldola smiled. “She wants to go too. She and I talk a lot.” His breathing was becoming laboured and he shuddered slightly. Yona sat up and looked at him, her heart aching with fear. “I know you stayed here because of me, but I will be gone tonight. Beva says she does not want

to live here without me, and she knows you do not wish to be here either. Phoran will go wherever you go. So, when I am gone, and the others arrive, promise me you will go home.”

“But, I...”

“Promise!”

“I promise.”

“Good. Then now I am happy because I am home, and you soon will be.”

They sat in silence a little while longer. Yona could feel the ragged breathing of the great beast and knew it would not be long. The sun was slowly setting behind them in the west.

“I am the last calliston on this land, Be-Elin told me.”

“I, I did not know.”

“She says that when her people die they believe they travel to the east over the missing sea. I cannot fly, but perhaps I will find my own way there. Maybe I can fly in my dreams.” He gasped and Yona held his hand tightly. “Will you sing to me? I want to take your voice with me more than any other.”

Yona nodded, and taking a long breath, began to sing.

*I woke in the morning sun,  
Knowing this was my last day.  
I walked through the valley wide,  
And in the grass did lay.*

*I danced in the little stream,  
Felt the water round my feet,  
And dreamt that I could fly,  
As my heart slowed its beat.*

*I watched all my family  
Working in the fields,  
And blew them many kisses,  
Hoping they would heal.*

*I Stood upon the hilltop,  
Looking to the east,  
And spread my wondrous wings,  
So new to this old beast.*

*I flew into the air,  
Gazed upon the land,  
And waved a final farewell,  
With my soft and gracious hand.*

*And a voice reached up to me,  
From a girl who loved me dear,  
And she cried and blew a kiss,  
Into the night so clear.*

*For I know that I am loved,  
More than any other today,  
And I leave the world a little brighter,  
As I travel on my way.*

Yona finished her song and leant against the now still calliston. She was not sure when he had taken his last breath, but she hoped that as he had flown away in his dreams, he had left knowing how very much she had loved this most incredible beast; her best friend, Eldola.

*Thank you for reading Yona and the Beast, a short story from A World Called Dirt. If you have enjoyed the story, please leave a review wherever you bought it from. If you would like to read Series One of Dirt you can find more details on the dirt website:*

<http://aworldcalledirt.com>



## **Find out More about Dirt**

Learn more about the World of Dirt, the characters, the people, the dragons, the history and the background to the story at the special A World Called Dirt website.

More about the books, plus The Abbey, a section dedicated to everything about the world including character lists, pronunciation guides, maps and more. Also, comments from C. C. Hogan, explaining more about how he created the story and why he made certain plot decisions.

Don't worry, each section is marked up so that if you do not want to know details in advance of where you are in the books, you don't have to.

[www.aworldcalleddirt.com](http://www.aworldcalleddirt.com)

## **Books by C. C. Hogan**

### **Dirt – Series Two**

Five hundred years have passed since the war in The Prelates, now called Preland after Pree. The people have squandered the legacy left by Pree and Johnson Farthing, and the federation founded by the southern states has collapsed. Across both Preland and Bind, the population is smaller, poorer and fragmented, and the people are ruled by greedy, petty kings, barons and warlords. The humans of Dirt have forgotten their past, have few hopes for their future and the dragons are now nothing more than silly tales in children's stories and songs.

But the disease that threatened to destroy all the dragons has changed and is no longer fatal. And in Angyn, some of the dragons want to come home.

### **Girls of Dirt**

Silvi Farthing did not have the best of childhoods, despite living on the warm, safe Isle of Hope. She is now seventeen, has left her misogynistic family and has started her own little farm, breeding goats and making cheese for the local fishing village of Bay. She knows nothing about her family's history, other than she is related to some man called Johnson Farthing who was a founder of the community on the island centuries before. But when her brothers destroy her farm and attack her, saying that she should be married, she is rescued by the most incredible of creatures; Be-Elin the desert dragon.

So begins a new chapter in the story of Dirt as Silvi, Be-Elin, Mab-Abin and the Ancient Ferret, Weasel's daughter, work to bring back the dragons, and look for a country where they will be accepted by the people and can help build a better future for all of Dirt. Includes a recap of series one.

### **Dragons of Dirt**

The dragons are beginning to return, but it is early days and the two kings and their new dragon friends have many hills to climb. But the friends know that without finding the long-lost descendant of the Cwendrina and setting up a council on the Isle of Taken to bring the disparate people of Dirt together, their plans might fail.

Silvi and Ferret with the dragons Mab-Abin and Be-Elin set off across Preland in search of the descendant of Rustina Farthing. But across the Yonder Sea, enemy forces are building and it will down to Edver Kellin and Silvi to defeat these new threats and build new alliances.

### **People of Dirt**

The ghost of General Johnson Farthing has settled on the young shoulders of Silvi Farthing, and more and more, people are turning to her to lead them. In the north of Preland, a new threat is growing, one sworn to destroy the dragons once and for all, and in the beautiful kingdom of Sarn, the warring neighbours have attacked, Queen Fena is dead and the town of Don is besieged.

Can Dragon Leader Silvi and her dragons beat back these new threats? Does this young cheesemaker from the peaceful Isle of Hope have the strength to pick up the banner of her great father Johnson and build a new army?

Read the thrilling conclusion to series two of the fantasy saga, Dirt.

### **Dirt – Series One**

Johnson Farthing is tall, blonde and muscular. He is also desperately poor and makes his living shifting dirt for others in the dusty town of Wead-Wodder, Redust. He knows his life is far from perfect and he, like so many others, is at the bottom of the heap, but he is a young man with an optimistic streak, and he makes the best of a simple life.

But when his red-headed sister is kidnapped along with the daughter of the Prelate, the ruler of Redust, his life is changed forever, and he chases across an ocean and a continent with the help of a strange magician and an incredible sea dragon.

In the first series of Dirt, follow Johnson Farthing and his young friends as they join forces with the huge and beautiful dragons of Dirt to fight against conquerors who would take the world for their own and destroy any who get in the way. This is not a tale of kings or princesses, but of ordinary folk, human and dragon, and their hope that they can build a bright, future based on fairness, equality and freedom.

Start your journey with Dirt, then continue the story with Bloody Dirt, The Fight for Dirt and Hope. Available as both e-books and in paperback.

### **Yona and the Beast – Free short story**

Yona is cold. She and her friends are locked up in Tekkinmod's hall and they are dying from starvation, maltreatment and cold. When a young man breaks down the door and tells them to get out of there, their lives change dramatically.

Find out what happened to the slaves as they escape across Bind on the back of a huge Calliston in this free book available from the Dirt website: [aworldcalleddirt.com](http://aworldcalleddirt.com).

### **The Stink**

North London, 1976. The longest, hottest summer on record. The dustmen are on strike, the water is running out and the kids hate their parents. Which bunch of idiots would think it is a good idea to start a band?

Stench, Aroma, Smell, Haze and Fart might not have the sweetest nicknames in town, but these five have just finished their O-Levels and are on a mission to take their fledgling little band and get themselves a half decent gig. Songs are good, playing is getting better, Smell's voice is wicked, so what could possibly go wrong?

Aside from the National Front, smelly teens, the lead singer falling in love with the drummer and a double murder. But this is 1976. It is not only a different decade, it is a different planet.

If you were a teen back then, you will lap up the nostalgia. If you are a teen now, you will wish you had been there. The Stink. It was what the seventies were all about! Out Now

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## **About the author**

C.C. Hogan is a writer and musician originally from North London. He is a lover of both London and Fantasy. Find out more at his website: [www.cchogan.com](http://www.cchogan.com)