



Richard Due

THE DRAGONDAIN

Book Two / A Moon Realm Novel



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Chapter One

Return to Barreth



JASPER understood nightmares. Drowning, tumbling about in darkness, not being able to breathe—or just being *afraid* to breathe—these were all fair game in the realm of nightmares. The weirdest thing about this dream, though, was that he *really* thought he was wide awake. Of course, he'd had those before, too: the lucid ones—dreams so real they were *just* like being awake.

And he was pretty sure he was having one of them right now.

Wasn't Lily in this dream earlier? She was going on about something. . . .

With a crash of snapping twigs, Jasper came to rest. He had landed flat on his back, woozy and blinded.

Did I sleepwalk out of my window?

A grayness crept into his vision. Odd, muffled noises like birds and deeper sounds you might expect to hear at a zoo surrounded him. Something was thumping on his chest. In his head, Jasper heard voices.

“It’s definitely not she,” said an aristocratic voice.

“Are you sure? It looked an awful lot like her to me,” came a deeper, rumbling voice.

And there were other voices, in the background, but also inside his head.

“Shorter hair, different clothes. And if I’m not mistaken, this one is a male Dain cub.”

“I find it very hard to tell those Dain cubs apart, especially after they change their coats. And we’ve been in this swamp so long, my nose has become useless.”

Blurry, swirling lights appeared on the gray background. Jasper turned onto his side and groped around. *I’m definitely not in the yard*, he thought. He was lying in what felt like a giant bird’s nest. His vision cleared a bit more, and he realized that the blurry lights were actually intensely bright stars. The top edge of the nest flickered with the red glow of a nearby fire—a big one, from the sound of it. All of a sudden, an enormous bird’s head popped over the rim of the nest and peeked down at him, chattering something . . . *birdish*.

“Are you all right?” he heard in English, followed again with the strange thumping—or was it more like a pulsing?—echoing in time upon his chest.

The huge head pivoted as if to look nearby. “Is it possible it doesn’t understand me?” asked the bird.

“Nonsense,” said the deep rumbling voice, sounding much closer than it had just a moment before. “Lily understood us just—”

Something leaned over the nest, blotting out the stars. It was a great head—full of teeth and whiskers—wreathed by a blazing mane of fire. Two luminous, amber eyes the size of dinner plates stared down at him.

Jasper fell back and screamed, instinctively raising his arms for protection.

The fiery head retreated quickly, uncloaking the bright stars.

“Oh, I see your point,” conceded the deep voice.

After his initial fright subsided, Jasper began to think that what he had just seen was one of Uncle Ebb’s Rinn, who in the bedtime tales had always come off as rather friendly.

Not being one to cower, least of all in dreams, and convinced there was no way out but up, Jasper decided the best thing to do was face these creatures. Standing, however, he realized all he had on were an old t-shirt and some underwear.

Typical nightmare clothes, he thought wryly. I’m surprised I don’t have to pee.

And then he noticed the jacket bundled up in his arms. How convenient! He held the jacket close, wondering just how much control he had over this dream. As an experiment, Jasper closed

his eyes and willed the lump inside the jacket to become clothes and shoes. Unrolling it, he found pants, shirt, belt, socks and shoes. There were even snacks in the pockets.

“Nice,” he whispered.

As he leaned over to place the open bundle at his feet, something snake-like swung away from his chest. Instinctively, he batted it away—hard. But to his surprise, his hand connected with something hard and metallic. What happened next happened fast. The thing he’d hit seem to be attached to him as though by a chain around his neck. As it spun around from the force of his blow, he felt it wrapping around his head, first across his cheek, then around the back of his head, then—whomp!—it connected with his opposite temple. There was an explosion of stars before his eyes and he fell backwards, stunned like a stoned rabbit.

For a moment, all was quiet. Then Jasper popped into a sitting position swatting away at unseen enemies until the throbbing pain in his temple brought him back to reality. Tentatively, he probed the area and found an angry lump.

“Is everything all right in there?” came the aristocratic voice. “Do you require assistance?” said the voice slowly, in the way a person might talk to a small child who didn’t speak the local dialect.

“Um. No. Not necessary,” shouted Jasper, reaching for clothes and pulling them on. “All good here. No need to send in assistance.”

Moving fast, Jasper shot an arm through his jacket, tucked what he now surmised was his uncle’s necklace under his shirt,

and double-knotted his sneaker's laces because, even though he had no idea what was going on, he was really sure he didn't want to end up running around with one sneaker.

The larger branches made good handholds. "Be right—"

Jasper's head crested the rim of the nest. He was in the center of a large encampment. A dozen bonfires burned brightly, hissing and spitting as though they'd been constructed of damp wood, illuminating vast stands of cypress trees, pools of brackish water, and . . . Rinn, hundreds of Rinn.

"—there." Jasper gulped.

Forest Rinn, to be more precise, with their short, golden fur and the gigantic bows strapped to their long backs. All, that is, but two long-furred Valley Rinn, if his guess was right.

There were also creatures he didn't recognize, like the two oversized otter-looking things standing at attention by the long-furred orange Rinn who had peeked over the edge of the nest. There was something strange about that Rinn. Its fur and eyes were more like the color of Forest Rinn, but its coat was long and exceedingly well kept, as though it had been combed that morning. It was also the only Rinn there, Forest or Valley, wearing a war saddle.

The other Valley Rinn sported what his sister would call a red chestnut coat. Its emerald eyes darted about, as it avidly followed the progress of a huge moth circling one of the bonfires. The Rinn's rear end was hunkered down, and every time the moth circled, its haunches would sway side to side as though readying to launch. It was a very house cat-like behavior and Jasper couldn't help but snicker. The big Rinn must have heard

this, though, because after Jasper snickered it sat bolt upright, suddenly looking very dignified, though its eyes continued to dart excitedly and whiskers twitch as the moth made its next pass.

Jasper spotted a horrific, snoring pile of teeth, legs, and ears near one of the crackling fires. There appeared to be a superabundance of legs. Jasper considered his internal Moon Realm bestiary to be quite complete, but he had no good guess at to what was in that pile-up.

The tall bird with the bright blue plumage tilted its head, staring at him with one fiery orange eye the size of a fist. It couldn't have been more than a foot away from the nest and had been standing so still that Jasper hadn't even noticed it until it moved. It was then that Jasper noticed all the other birds, hundreds of them, all shapes and sizes perched within and around the trees.

"I don't believe we have met," stated the great bird. "My name is Aleron." Aleron flexed his great blue wings and bowed his head. "And this is Her Majesty, Nimlinn Goldenclif, of the clan Broadpaw, Queen of the Valley Rinn," he continued, nodding to the great orange Rinn wearing the saddle, "and Roan," he finished, nodding to the chestnut Rinn.

Not knowing exactly what was proper, Jasper lowered his head to each of them in turn, bowing most deeply to Nimlinn. Although Roan returned his bow with a slight nod, Nimlinn remained erect, looking regal and eyeing him with what Jasper correctly guessed was suspicion.

"Where is Lily?" said Nimlinn.

"Nimlinn!" interrupted Aleron. "All in due time."

Aleron's voice had been the aristocratic one, and Jasper could tell—somehow—that the voice was male. When he thought about it, he realized that it was through this same means that Jasper now knew Nimlinn's voice had a definite female quality.

The bird settled a great blinking eye on Jasper. "And your name would be?" he asked very pleasantly.

Jasper eyed them all again, marveling at how real everything seemed.

"My name—" Jasper placed a hand to his oddly constricting throat, which was no longer speaking English. "My name—" he placed his other hand over the pendant, pulsing on his chest "—is Jasper Milfoil Winter."

Jasper turned to address Nimlinn, one hand still to his throat, which felt funny every time he spoke. "Lily is my younger sister," he choked. "But how do you know her name?"

Nimlinn leaned back, standing slightly taller, and her eyes grew wider. "What! Did she tell you nothing?!"

Jasper scrunched up his eyes in thought. "She said somethin' . . . I don't know . . . Does it matter?"

With that, Jasper climbed over the edge of the nest and leapt to the ground, which was soft and damp. When he straightened back up, he noticed that Roan had placed an enormous paw over one eye and was slowly shaking his head. It was a very human expression that somehow didn't seem so out of place. Nimlinn was speechless. But Aleron was not.

"I see," he said matter-of-factly. "Then we have much to do. Nimlinn, you should get back to Sea Denn—immediately. Your forest kin will keep you safe along the ocean road and through

the pass. Roan's clutter can protect you as well. My flock, for the time that we occupy your lands, are, of course, at Your Majesty's service."

Distracted, Nimlinn nodded to Aleron, muttering what might have been a thank you. But her outraged gaze quickly returned to Jasper, and she found her tongue.

"What *did* Lily tell you?" she demanded.

Jasper pursed his lips. "I don't know. Somethin' about . . ." Jasper thought hard, trying to remember the dreamy conversation in his room. ". . . about . . . going back somewhere."

Nimlinn narrowed her eyes, sweeping her ears back in what would be, for Tarzanna, a very angry manner. "Tell me," she said slowly, "exactly what transpired."

"Well . . . I was sleeping in my bed, and Lily was shaking me."

"So you were asleep?"

"Yeah, and I was dreamin' something. I don't know what, but it wasn't as good as this—"

"Wait!" interrupted Nimlinn, and now her voice took on a new menace and her gigantic whiskers began to twitch. "Am I to understand that . . . you think me a dream?" she roared.

"Nimlinn!" said Aleron. "Control yourself!"

Jasper took an involuntary step backwards and felt his shoulder brush up against the nest. Roan leapt from his post behind Nimlinn and positioned himself so he could interpose between Nimlinn and Jasper.

Nimlinn bent down on her front paws, and her tail, as thick as a fire hose, twitched from side to side. Her long fur puffed

out, and she seemed to grow in size. “What else did she say?” Nimlinn pressed.

With the thumb and index finger of his right hand, Jasper pinched a big piece of flesh on his left forearm.

Sure seems real, he thought.

Jasper tried to remember, but it was all very foggy. “I . . . I think I threw her out of the room. Then I went back to sleep.”

Nimlinn closed her eyes and bowed her head, her anger seeping away.

“Aleron,” she said more calmly. “Explain to him what you understand of the coin. Be *certain* he knows where *not* to set it.”

Nimlinn turned to her otter-like servants. “Wyflings!” They leapt to attention.

“Snerliff, inform Roan the wirtles are now his charge. Twizbang, prepare to depart!”

Twizbang’s eyes widened and appeared to get stuck that way. “But Your Majesty, Roan is standing right over there. I’m sure he heard—WE’RE GOING *THROUGH* THE MOUNTAINS!” he said, and his whiskers appeared to freeze in place, sticking out at odd angles around his gaping mouth.

“We will take the pass to Armashen so as to keep close to the forest Rinn. Their bows are the best match for the dragonflies.”

Jasper looked sideways at one of the bows on the backs of the forest Rinn. The arrows were the length of spears.

Jasper spread his thumb and finger to the length of a dragonfly, furrowed his brow, then bounced his glance several times between the spear-sized arrows on the nearest Rinn’s back and

his fingers. “Best . . . match, wait . . .” But just then the entire encampment of birds, as if on some unspoken signal, took to flight. The sound was deafening, and the wind was strong enough to tousle Jasper’s hair. In seconds, only Aleron was left.

“Jasper,” called Aleron, hopping nimbly before him. “Quickly! The moon coin, let me see it.”

“The moon what?” said Jasper.

“The coin! The coin at the end of your uncle’s necklace!” said Aleron.

And for the first time, Jasper seriously entertained the thought that this might not be a dream.

Leaning forward, hoping Nimlinn wouldn’t hear, Jasper said, “Aleron . . . I’m not dreaming, am I?”

“Would that you were, my friend. Now show me that coin.”

Jasper fished out the pendant from under his shirt and held it between them as Aleron explained how to open and close the fob; how to spin the inner circle of moons; and how the little circles on the coin represented all the other moons. He ticked off the names, but Jasper knew them well. He’d heard them many times before.

“Wait, you skipped this last circle,” said Jasper.

“Did I?” asked Aleron, his eyebrows raising inquisitively.

“Yeah. This one. With the little moon next to—”

“Yes?”

Jasper licked his lips. “Tell me more.”

“Quite. Nimlinn tells me it took a full day for the coin to recharge before sending Lily to Dain, which is a new detail to me. But do not use that as a hard and fast rule. It could be different

going to other moons that are at opposite sides of the sphere, or back to . . .”

“Where I came from.”

“Precisely: the coin’s recharge time may very well be influenced by how close you are to your destination. We know that Dain was very close when Lily went there.”

As things became more and more complicated, Jasper became more and more nervous.

“Sphere?” asked Jasper.

“Yes. The sphere is the area within which the various moons of the Moon Realm travel.”

Suddenly, Jasper was transported to the bedtimes of his youth. Uncle Ebb was sitting on the bed, holding his hands in a sphere.

“And all of these moons,” Jasper began, in a dreamy voice, “circling and spinning around themselves, in turn circle one sun. And when a moon within the sphere is closest to the sun, we call that Sunward. And when a moon within the sphere is farthest from the sun, we call that Darkward, and in the middle . . .” Jasper’s voice trailed off.

“The Middling,” finished Aleron. “Good, you *do* have some sense about where you are. Tell me—”

“Lily went to Dain,” said Jasper, more as a statement of fact than a question. “Wait . . . Lily was here on Barreth first? How long is a day here?”

“Nimlinn will tell you many things . . . I’m sure . . . maybe,” added Aleron, not sounding too confident. “I, however, must rejoin my flock. If what Nimlinn has said about that saddle is true, we will be hard pressed to keep up with her—although we

will have the advantage of the straighter path.”

Jasper stared confusedly at Aleron. “But Aleron, you’ll be flying, right? In the air?”

“We will not be the only ones flying tonight, my friend.” Aleron leaned forward. “Hold tightly to that saddle.” Then Aleron spread his great wings, beating them against the air.

With the last of the fires doused, and the last of the forest Rinn departed, the darkened camp was nearly empty. Even the horrific pile of sleeping paws and teeth was gone.

A vague memory tugged at Jasper’s mind, one of Roan arguing with Nimlinn while Aleron was explaining the workings of the moon coin. Jasper watched the two wyflings busily attending to Nimlinn, who now lay on her long stomach so they could more easily climb up and down the handsomely tooled saddle resting on her back.

The deep of night was on them, but it was not dark. Looking up, Jasper noticed for the first time the great moons hanging in the sky: some full, some hiding behind others, and behind them all, a black background pierced by a teeming sea of bright stars.

“Oh my,” said Jasper to no one in particular.

He took up the pendant at the end of the necklace, studying its face by the moonlight.

Lily! he thought. This is your doing! And if this is no dream, and if I am truly in the Moon Realm, then Uncle Ebb’s bedtime tales were . . . not . . . just . . . stories.

He looked up from his scrutiny of the coin, suddenly aware that Nimlinn, posed like a slit-eyed sphinx, had been studying *him*.

“Your Majesty,” said Jasper somberly, “do you know where my uncle is?”

But she just continued to stare at him, making him feel more uncomfortable. Not knowing what to do with his hands, he nervously stuffed them into his pockets. He pulled out a LUNA Bar, tore off the wrapper, and began eating. What else had Lily put into motion? Jasper tried to pull back the memory of what his sister had said after waking him, but nothing more would resolve. Annoyed, he thrust the half-eaten bar back into his pocket.

“Your Majesty, where is your Dainrider? And why are you the only saddled Rinn?”

Nimlinn’s tail twitched suddenly, and one of the wyflings, his arms full of supplies, had to leap quickly to avoid it, letting out a little yelp.

“I have no Dain rider,” said Nimlinn, slowly and with great menace.

“I don’t understand. Did you lose him?”

“Lose him? I have lost no one. Your sister, Lily, is the only one ever to grace *my* back.”

Jasper thought this very odd. It certainly didn’t jibe with Uncle Ebb’s descriptions of the Rinn and their cool-headed Dainriders; in Ebb’s tales, they were like one being when they rode together. “But without a Dainrider, how do you make good decisions in battle—”

Nimlinn’s claws shot out of their sheaths and dug effortlessly into the soft earth. Her head twisted slightly to one side and a strange, deep sound came from her throat. Slowly, she mastered

herself, and her claws retracted.

“It is time for us to go,” she said. “Climb aboard. Snerliff, make sure he is properly strapped into the saddle, and see that the two of you are well situated.”

The wyflings helped Jasper into the saddle, and Jasper held out a hand to each of them in turn. The pads of their paws were soft and warm, and the tufts of fur between their fingers tickled. Once they were all ready, Nimlinn sprang up and settled into a galloping gait, plowing through or weaving around the dark pools of water, easily bounding over the smaller ones.

Several times Nimlinn leapt into what appeared to Jasper to be total darkness, as the encroaching canopy of trees above them blocked out so much of the moonlight. But Jasper remembered the bedtime tales about the Rinn. He knew that with even scant moonlight, a Rinn could see as if it were daytime. Even in complete darkness, there was much a Rinn could discern from the way air currents swirled about its whiskers and fur.

They entered a wide glade where the light was strong enough for Jasper to see that they had arrived at the edge of a towering forest and that Nimlinn was steering them to what looked like a black tunnel leading into it.

Within the tunnel, the darkness became absolute, yet Nimlinn increased her pace. The wind blew strongly through Jasper’s hair, and he found that to keep his eyes from drying out, he had to narrow them to slits.

“Your Majesty—” he shouted.

“You do not need to scream in order to be heard.”

“I’d like to know what’s going on. What did Lily do while

she was here?”

For a long time, they moved through the night air with only the sound of the wind in Jasper’s ears.

“Your Majesty! Where is Rinnjinn?”

Nimlinn made a growling noise that Jasper took for exasperation.

More time passed.

At last Nimlinn’s voice boomed out in the darkness. “You will need to know . . . a few things, I suppose.”

She explained to Jasper the powers of the saddle, including its ability to grant sleep. She gave a brief account of the morning of the crossover and Rengtiscura’s attack. Jasper cringed when he heard about Lily’s mistakenly setting the coin to an unknown moon, and he felt Nimlinn’s disappointment as she described the meeting with Aleron that came just too late. She mentioned nothing about Roan’s darkness or The Tomb of the Fallen. Jasper, for his part, asked many questions, especially about Rengtiscura, the scaramann, and the dragonflies; he, like Lily, had heard nothing of these in the bedtime tales.

Slowly, Nimlinn began to see that Jasper was not the complete dolt he had first appeared to be. He impressed her with his knowledge of Sea Denn’s defenses and of how important it was *not* to storm Fangdelve—and with his understanding that Greydor had acted in the only way he could. During this discussion, it became clear to Nimlinn that Jasper possessed a tactician’s mind and that his way of thinking was very different from Lily’s. After Nimlinn described the faster route through the mountains, Jasper surprised her by presenting a sound argu-

ment for returning that way. He pointed out that if the dragonflies were about, once they saw the spacing of Roan's clutter, they would most likely post themselves in a position that would allow them to mount a surprise attack. If Nimlinn cut through the mountains, although they would be alone, they would be far from defenseless. This saddle was no mere riding saddle, but a war saddle bristling with armament. And the dirazakein, the razor-sharp hubcap-sized discs that Lily had, with Snerliff and Twizbang's help, loaded into the saddle, would be more than a match for any dragonflies. The only time Jasper wavered was when he wondered if Aleron might miss them. Here Nimlinn found herself in the odd predicament of arguing *for* Jasper's plan, and in that moment, she knew that he was right.

They passed through the Northern neck of Rihnwood and out to the ocean road with its roaring waves. The moons were bright and the clouds few. To their left, one moon, which Nimlinn identified as Rel' Kah, was so large that it took up a third of the sky, even with its lower quarter dipping below the horizon of the sea. The moonlight reflecting off Rel' Kah was so bright, and coming in from such a low angle, that Jasper found he could at times see quite deeply into the periphery of the forest.

They had not been on this road long before Jasper suggested that he attempt to will himself and the wyflings into a short sleep, one that would end before they reached the mountains. Nimlinn did not see the advantage of this at first, but Jasper pointed out that on all the long route back to Sea Denn, the easiest place to defend themselves would be along the forest's edge, as they could veer into it at a moment's notice. Nimlinn

eyed the forest of her youth and could not disagree with Jasper's logic.

When they reached the foot of the mountains, and Nimlinn was having deep doubts about employing a plan made by a mere Dain cub, Jasper and the wyflings awoke as if by clockwork.

The sun had been up for a full hour. As soon as it became apparent that they were not taking the road through the pass, Aleron descended from the skies and consulted with them briefly. During the night, he had met with several owls and bats who had news of the goings-on in the valley. Fangdelve was still under siege. The Clan of the Broadpaw had now joined Greydor's forces in great numbers. Aleron went on to describe a black smoke that billowed freely from the higher reaches of Fangdelve. When Jasper inquired about what that meant, neither Nimlinn nor Aleron would say.

Nimlinn attacked the ascent with spectacular skill, performing great feats as she unnervingly clawed her way up sheer cliffs, leapt wide gorges, and raced across narrow ridges on which a mountain goat would have stumbled. Jasper, for his part, could barely contain his excitement. During their descent, Nimlinn had to chide him more than once for screaming things like, "Yahoo!" and "Faster! Faster!"

At the end of their descent, after leaping the river of Barradil, they happened on a large encampment of Rinn, waiting under Roan's orders in case Nimlinn returned along the unique path she had used on her way to the Blight Marsh. Nimlinn was not at all happy to see them. Putting on a burst of speed, she entered

the camp like a low-flying missile, overturning chairs, tables, tents, and more than one Rinn.

Once within the valley, and with Sea Denn a distant point on the horizon, she began to outpace Aleron's flock, dropping them one by one. Finally, only Aleron himself remained, but even he could not stay with her for the entire journey. Jasper was not in the habit of guessing speeds, but he was certain that, if she'd been on a highway, Nimlinn would have been passing all the other cars.

The sun had traveled far across the sky and was getting low when Jasper first caught a clear sight of Sea Denn, city of the Rinn. It was precisely as he had always envisioned it, just as Uncle Ebb had painted it on canvas and in words. Only this time, it was real.

Rather than scrambling up and down the edge of the crater that surrounded Sea Denn, Nimlinn simply leapt the entire thing in a single bound. Nor did she bother with the switchbacks that led to the Ridgegate. Instead, she raked and clawed her way up the lower plateau, her final bound landing her smartly on the lower rampart. Startled Rinn scattered where she landed. Jasper could hear their voices, translated into English in his head. The Rinn cheered when they realized it was their Queen. A scout Rinn signaled to the Ridgegate, from which a lone bird took to the air, spiraling upward to the Palace Keep.

“Where are we going?” shouted Jasper over the cheers.

“First we will see Greydor, and then I will take you to the special place I took your sister. You may find some items of interest there.”

Nimlinn took a shorter route to the Great Hall than Roan had with Lily, through chambers grander than anything Jasper could have imagined. Twisting passages led through elaborate glittering halls hung with rich tapestries. Nimlinn's pace was a loping one now, but once they were moving within corridors and rooms, everything seemed to flash by at a terrific pace. A narrow stairway—narrow, at least, to a full-grown Rinn—led to the Great Hall, curving along the interior wall of the Palace Keep. At last Nimlinn veered off onto one of the many landings, stopping before a great Rinn whose long black fur was shot through with gray.

“Greydor,” said Nimlinn, and they nuzzled each other and pawed each other's manes. Jasper was starting to feel a bit uncomfortable when Snerliff reached around from behind and unbuckled the straps holding them in the saddle.

Jasper and the wyflings slid down the side of the great saddle to the stone floor. Snerliff wasted no time. “Come with me, young master,” he said quickly, taking Jasper's elbow in a furry paw and guiding him toward a low dais.

Although Jasper had seen an image of Uncle Ebb's painting of the Great Hall of the Rinn, he had never actually viewed it in person. When Lily was eight, she had come up with the idea of giving Finder their mother's digital camera and asking him to take pictures of all the paintings in restricted areas of the mansion, where *he* was allowed to travel but *they* weren't. It worked perfectly. Better yet, from examining the placement of windows and fireplaces, they were able to make some educated guesses as to where the paintings might be. For instance, they

were pretty sure the painting of The Great Hall of the Rinn was on the third floor, in a turreted room with many windows, hanging over a fireplace. They had identified the likely room by standing themselves out in the yard and observing how the sun entered the various windows. Lily had notebooks full of such observations and sketches. They'd packed a lunch and made a day of it. Jasper had always wanted to see the painting in person. He never once imagined that he would see the actual room first.

The ceiling was a low dome and the enormous brazier in the center was warm with coals. The pillars circling the room were wide, and the views of plains, mountains, and ocean were magnificent. Jasper wanted to view everything: the sea town of Foam, the besieged tower of Fangdelve, the tree-lined streets of Sea Denn's upper city. From where he stood, craning his neck, he could see a smoldering cloud over some of the valley, but the view of Fangdelve, which he knew would be opposite the sea, was blocked. Through one of the openings between the pillars, however, he could see Clawforge, its unmistakable surface covered with magical runes.

After a short time, Nimlinn said something that caused Greydor to suddenly swing his big head around and look at Jasper squarely. It was as if a heat lamp had been turned on him, and Jasper found he could not meet Greydor's gaze easily. Within moments, Jasper found he had to disengage his eyes and look instead at the floor.

"You have brought another, different, Dain cub?" asked Greydor, as he padded to the low dais and lay down, sphinx-like,

Nimlinn taking her place beside him.

“Jasper is Ebbram’s kin, and Lily’s litter-mate,” she replied in a clear voice.

Jasper lifted his head and looked into Greydor’s great emerald eyes. From his talks with Nimlinn, Jasper knew Rinnjinn was considered a mere myth—a bedtime story for cubs—and that with no Rinnjinn, Greydor was the closest thing Barreth had to a ruler. He’d also learned that Lily had placed her trust in these Rinn.

“You have come at a strange time,” began Greydor in a commanding voice. “We have fought and destroyed a great force of scaramann, even killed their queen. But it was costly, and we have been much weakened. Should Rengtiscura have another attack of equal strength waiting for us on our next crossover with Darwyth, we will not fare so well. These are desperate times. Even now, the scaramann hold the tower of Fangdelve. We have surrounded them, and we stay out of range of their bolts, but they are working evil there. They have been brewing foul beasts. So far they have brought us fire-breathing dragonflies, but what they will bring next I know not. We cannot allow them to hold the tower, and yet I know of no way to remove them easily. The scaramann are notorious for needing very little in the way of food. And there are rooms within Fangdelve that we can ill afford the scaramann to access. I fear it will only be a matter of time before they find some way to breach one of them.”

“What do you plan to do?”

“I don’t know. But if you were able to help, as Lily did—”

“Me? What could I do?”

“You could help Roan call down the darkness, as did your sister.”

Jasper felt his stomach drop. *Lily did what?*

“I—I would help if I knew how, but I have no idea how . . . Lily?”

“We believe the dragonflies are still few in number, but if allowed to breed and multiply, they will hunt down my Rinn. We have little in the way of defense against them.”

“What about the forest Rinn and their bows?”

“The Broadpaw cannot be everywhere at once, and they have Rihnwood to protect.”

“Well,” said Jasper, “where are your riders?”

Greydor’s eyebrows furrowed, and he cocked his head slightly to one side.

“What do you mean?”

“Your Rinn are easy prey to taunts, yes?”

Greydor nodded grimly. “It is true that once in battle, our instincts become more difficult to overcome. But we are what we are—that cannot be changed!”

“I understand,” said Jasper, “but where are your riders?”

“We have no riders! We are free!” declared Greydor.

On their ride from the Blight Marsh, Nimlinn had explained many things to Jasper, but he still could not understand why parts of the bedtime tales were so wrong. As Uncle Ebb had always told it, the Dainriders and the Rinn were like brothers.

“I’m not suggesting you not be free. I’m simply suggesting you outfit your Rinn with war saddles and riders. The men of

Dain are cool-headed in battle, and a worthy asset to have at your disposal. They're a second pair of eyes. They're good with bow, sword, and lance. And you can't use a dirazakein at full gallop without one."

Greydor twitched, as though repulsed, and his ears swept back, but Jasper could see that he was listening.

"Dirazakein?" said Greydor, sounding as if the word were foreign to him.

Jasper could not disguise his shock that a Rinn would not know what a dirazakein was. He took two anxious steps toward Nimlinn but halted when he saw how alarmed Twizbang and Snerliff became.

"Your Majesty," Jasper said to Nimlinn, "may I show him?"

Nimlinn closed her eyes and gave Jasper a regal nod of assent. It was a subtle gesture. Jasper thought he detected a slight smile at the corners of her mouth, as though she was pleased by his opening statement. Twizbang and Snerliff lifted Jasper into the saddle and Greydor glared at the sight. Jasper flipped back one of the protective leather flaps and very carefully hoisted out a dirazakein. How many times had he imagined what it would be like to ride a Rinn, in the full onslaught of battle?

"This, Your Majesty, is a dirazakein." Its silver blades caught the light, reflecting razor-sharp menace. "They must weigh forty pounds. How many scaramann do you think a pack of Rinn could cut through, running at a full gallop, with the riders unleashing round after round of these?"

Greydor was silent, but his eyes widened perceptibly.

"And the Dainriders are not without skills. They would be

able to guide you away from tricks and taunts. These are *not* small advantages. These are powerful tactics. How lucky it is for Rengtiscura that the Rinn and the Dain have become separated. You're not natural enemies. You're long-lost friends."

"These . . . dirazakein," said Greydor. "They would be most formidable against a dragonfly." Greydor made a motion to handle the dirazakein, but Jasper quickly stowed it and jumped down, acting as though he hadn't noticed Greydor reaching. Obediently, he returned to his place before the dais.

Distracted, his paw still half stretched out, Greydor glanced at the smoldering valley. Fangdelve was clearly visible from the dais, the terrible black smoke billowing from its upper reaches.

Greydor turned his attention to Jasper. "We could not survive a second all-out attack," said Greydor in a low conspiratorial voice. "And while your idea has merit, my Rinn will not allow themselves to be ridden. It is asking too much, too soon. There may be a few Rinn that could see past such things, but the common Rinn will not abide thoughts such as these."

"What if you started small?" Jasper offered.

Greydor turned to Nimlinn; her tail twitched.

"If you had a small group," Jasper urged, sensing his moment had arrived, "one that was looked up to, one that you trusted, and outfitted them with war saddles and riders . . . the other Rinn would see them in battle. They would see what was possible. They would be able to talk to the warrior Rinn, hear firsthand that the Dainriders were not an evil but an asset. They would see the potential."

"Roan," said Greydor, under his breath. "He could do such a

thing. And his Rinn are more loyal to him than any I have ever known.”

“Roan,” hissed Nimlinn. “Surely there are others.”

“Snerliff,” said Greydor, and the wyfling dashed to Greydor’s side.

“Yes, Your Majesty!” he yelped.

“You will need to be quiet. No Rinn must know what you are up to. We’ll need a dozen saddles to start. And after you finish those, you can start working on as many as you have the leather for. But you will need to keep them out of sight. Make them . . . make them in your private halls. Yes, that will work nicely. And send word to Roan that I will need to see him as soon as possible. That leaves just one problem: riders. We have no official lines of communication with Dain. Our only real connection there is a lunamancer named Ember, and she has ever counseled us not to contact the Royal House of Dain.”

“You have another, larger problem. You have no more dirazakein—”

“No,” said Greydor softly. “Those we have in abundance.”

Jasper’s mouth fell open. “But—”

“Within a private chamber of the Royal Armory, there is a mosaic that bears the design. As a cub, I first sensed the spell that seals the hidden room beyond. When I asked my fathers what was in it, they would not tell me. I tried to open it many times, but it was not until I ascended the throne that it would yield to me.”

“So you have seen them. You must know.”

“Know? What would I know? It’s true that I have seen them,

but I have never known their name. And the place they occupy in our history is but myth, hearsay.”

“Your Majesty, if I may be so bold, surely you have noticed the design of the dirazakein, the craftwork, is clearly not of Barreth.”

Greydor’s ears swept back.

“It is unmistakably the work of Dain,” said Jasper.

“Yes, it is not of Barreth,” Greydor affirmed with deadly calm.

Jasper nodded. “About those Dainriders . . . I know that my sister has recently ventured to Dain. Perhaps she has learned something.” He grasped the pendant. “I can go there myself, learn what she’s accomplished.”

Greydor shook his big head. “No, Dain is far too dangerous a place—”

“I haven’t had the chance to speak with her, but she came home safely and sent me here to meet you.”

Greydor was silent for a time.

“What if she didn’t leave so much as flee? I cannot ask that of you,” he said, finally.

“You don’t need to. Lily *wanted* me to come here, to explore. She wanted me to see it with my own eyes.” Jasper flipped the fob on the moon coin. The little moons on its face shimmered a silvery white.

“Wait!” said Nimlinn. “Close that! If you are determined to follow in Lily’s footsteps, you should be equally prepared. Let me show you the place I took Lily. You may find something there to aid you in your journey.”

Having made the decision to risk traveling to Dain, Jasper

was as excited as he had ever been about anything. Meeting a dragon, talking to it, flying on its back—this trip would be the realization of a personal dream he'd harbored since first learning about Dain. Jasper could imagine nothing that could compare. It was a difficult decision, but, in the end, he nicked the fob shut.

“All right,” he conceded, “but we must hurry.”

Chapter Two

Return to the Room of the Fallen



JASPER'S descent to the Tomb of the Fallen was a low-ceilinged roller-coaster ride. Snerliff and Twizbang chattered nervously the whole way down, but Jasper couldn't hear them well enough over the racket of Nimlinn's claws to make sense of their conversation.

Just inside the tomb, Nimlinn lowered herself. Snerliff opened a saddlebag, pulled out two empty sacks, and handed one to

Twizbang. Together they dove off the saddle into a mountain of orange fur and immediately busied themselves stowing the stuff in the sacks. Jasper slid off the saddle and landed next to them.

Nimlinn took up an enormous portion of the floor, further illustrating that whoever built this room was most certainly not Rinn. The ceiling's vaulted arches were shallow, and the pillars holding them thick, making the space a tight fit even for Jasper. It was a warm place, possibly kept that way by the beautiful iron lamps hanging from the ceiling, making obstacles of themselves but keeping the place well lit. As Jasper passed one, a bit of scrollwork caught his eye. It was a motif he'd seen before. He couldn't remember exactly where, but he had a pretty good idea it had been somewhere in Uncle Ebb's mansion—maybe on a piece of molding, or in a scene from one of his many paintings. Stone slabs, evenly spaced, rose from the floor and filled the room. Each slab was topped with a stone likeness of a reclining man or woman dressed in armor or robes. Wide sills stretched from the tops of the slabs, and arrayed upon them were every manner of weapon and artifact a person would need for battle or magic: great shields; wicked swords; powerful bows; helms and clothing; and quite a few artifacts Jasper didn't recognize.

“You brought Lily here,” said Jasper to Nimlinn as he paced along a wall, his fingertips skimming over a mural depicting the destruction of an enormous tree. “What did she take?”

“She took a riding cloak and helmet, some of those plates to protect the lower parts of her front and back legs, a pair of boots”—here Jasper laughed—“a small wooden ball, and a

single slim ring.”

“Little light on the weaponry there, sis,” he said dryly.

“I had to *make* her take the cloak and boots.”

“Boots? Lily? She must not have seen them. There’s so much stuff in here.”

Jasper skidded to a halt in front a mural depicting an immense pitched battle taking place at the foot of the tower Fangdelve.

“Whoa, what’s this?”

In the painting, the valley floor all around the tower was covered by a pall of dust. Fighting in this dust were the shapes of Rinn and giant beetles the size of small cars. Squinting, Jasper could just make out the human riders on many of the Rinn’s backs. A sizable army of men present, holding pikes, swords, and shields—Dragondain shields. The sky above was thick with fire-breathing dragonflies and winged dragons.

Jasper ran his finger over the black smoke billowing from the top of Fangdelve. “So how many times has”—Jasper paused to get the pronunciation just right—“Rengtiscura taken Fangdelve?”

“To my knowledge, twice.”

“Was it common for Dragondain to fight beside Rinn?”

“As I’ve told you, other than myths and your uncle’s tales, we have no real proof of Dragondain ever fighting alongside Rinn.

Jasper spread his arms wide and gestured at the stone slabs. “But Your Majesty, these are fallen Dragondain . . . and lunamancers. Obviously, they fought and died here on Barreth. And in a battle of great distinction, earning them this tomb. This mural is the only one showing Dragondain. This *must* be their

tale.”

Nimlinn nodded. “A reasonable assumption, young cub. But how do you know for certain that these are your fabled Dragondain?”

Jasper picked up a shield and held it up for Nimlinn to see. “A winged dragon being ridden by a man or woman, *this* is the emblem of the Dragondain. But there’s more.” Jasper dashed back to the painting and pointed to a small banner flying above the battle. “They’re fighting . . . beside Rinnjinn.”

Nimlinn’s eyes narrowed. Snerliff dropped the bag of fur he was stuffing and padded over to the painting until his nose and whiskers were nearly touching the paint, then wheeled around to face Nimlinn.

“It’s Rinnjinn’s standard!”

“Jasper,” began Nimlinn, “Rinnjinn was *not* a real Rinn.”

“That’s right. He was more than Rinn. He was . . .”

“The one who made us,” finished Nimlinn.

And with that, Jasper finally confirmed the answer to a question Ebb had always managed to avoid answering. Jasper had guessed right, and he smiled victoriously.

Nimlinn sensed she’d given something away. But it wasn’t like she’d told him anything he couldn’t have discovered during a day’s study at the scrolls in the Royal Library. Or even, for that matter, from a well-versed Rinn bard at any tavern in Sea Denn. Still, she couldn’t shake the feeling she’d need to keep on her pads around this young cub, lest something truly important slip.

“Enough talk of paintings and Dragondain and Rinnjinn—

what will you take from this room?”

Jasper quickly finished his tour of the tomb, taking in everything, cataloging his choices. He was surprised at how many of the armaments he knew by name. Jasper was tall for his age and strongly built. Even so, all of the armor here was too large or made for a woman.

After a time, Nimlinn snorted. “Don’t tell me you can’t find anything either.”

“Quite the contrary,” murmured Jasper. In the theater of his mind played movie scene after movie scene of the good guys suiting up to take on the bad guys. But what to take? Travel light? Travel heavy? Just how much of this stuff could he get away with?

Something familiar drew Jasper’s eye to a bit of detailed metalwork on the hilt of a sword. Two moons—one full, the other crescent—graced the tips of the cross-guard. He grasped the scabbard in one hand, the grip in the other, and gave a good yank. The moons on the hilt seemed to grow brighter, or maybe it was just a trick of the light. Runes ran down the length of the blade.

“Are you a master swordsman, young cub?” asked Nimlinn.

Jasper held up the sword. It felt wonderfully, impossibly light. He gave it a quick flourish and smacked the blade into the corner of a lamp, shearing off a small chunk of the metalwork.

“Not last I checked,” said Jasper.

“Then that sword will remain here.”

Jasper looked up, surprised. “Why?” He wondered, nervously, what else Nimlinn might rule out. His dream of outfitting

himself like the ultimate warrior knight suddenly began to fade.

“While I don’t know the history of much that lies within this room, I do know that that is a moon sword—one of the nine. They are highly sought-after objects. And so, unless you believe you could keep that from someone who has lived his whole life pursuing one, I believe you would do well to leave it here. Should you some day prove yourself, I will happily allow you to take it. I believe it would be in your best interests for now to keep a lower profile. These fallen were not placed here because they were ordinary. I suspect that many of the items they possessed are every bit as special as they were. You may take whatever you wish, so long as it isn’t too . . . flashy.”

Jasper hadn’t given much thought to actually wielding these weapons against someone who had spent his whole life training with a blade. Instantly, he saw the wisdom of Nimlinn’s suggestion.

He sheathed the moon sword and carefully returned it, then bent down to pick up the piece of metalwork he’d sheared off. Holding it close to the lamp it had belonged to, he turned it end over end in the pale light. It had a curling ocean wave motif, whereas the cut of the sword was smooth as glass.

“I understand,” he said, quietly pocketing the bit of metal. And suddenly Jasper knew exactly what he wanted. Dashing over to one of the swordswomen, he selected a pair of bronze-colored vambraces, quickly strapping them to his forearms. Next, he grabbed a matching pair of greaves and strapped them over his jeans, just below the knees. Light would be the order of the day.

Jasper ran over to the place where Lily had found her cloak

and boots. Her purple high-tops stood out like . . . well, a pair of purple high-tops in a medieval tomb full of period clothes and armament. Jasper grinned as he lifted them just enough to retrieve the studded leather vest they rested on. The vest was a little tight but had buckles on the sides. Moving to yet another slab, he wasted no time belting a short sword to his waist before finally racing back to the figure of the second swordswoman for a hooded riding cloak.

“Perhaps you should take one of those round things,” said Nimlinn. “Nearly all of them have one.”

Jasper placed his tennis shoes on the slab where, a moment before, there had been a knee-high pair of riding boots. He eyed a few of the shields; some were quite small, others very large and heavy looking.

“I think not,” said Jasper, weaving back through the slabs toward the narrow nooks carved beside the doors. In each nook rested a pair of iron-tipped wooden staffs. The tips were engraved with an odd script, which flowed down them one character at a time, nine in all.

“You’re not thinking of taking one of those, are you?” said Nimlinn incredulously.

“Yes, and why not?” answered Jasper.

“Jasper,” began Nimlinn delicately, “I think those are meant for propping the doors open.”

Jasper fought back a smile. “These, Your Majesty, are quarterstaffs,” he said admiringly.

“Call them what you will, I still think—”

No sooner had Jasper’s hand touched one of the staffs than

a horrible wave of dread flowed through him. He broke into a cold sweat, and a series of painful jolts lanced through his forearm. Every time he tried to let go, his grip tightened painfully, as though he were being electrocuted. A scream rose in his throat, bursting out in strangled gasps. He closed his eyes and a dark ill suffused his body. He felt his head go light. When he opened his eyes, he was shocked to see both hands firmly gripping the shaft. The pain crept past his elbows, and dim voices echoed in the corners of his mind, but the growing pain drowned them out. With every passing second, the staff became heavier—either that, or he was growing weaker.

The next thing Jasper knew, he was sitting on the ground, the pain clearing from his head and arms. The quarterstaff was no longer in his grip, and Nimlinn's face was close, her thick paw raised as though she had just struck something out of his hands. He remembered a clattering sound, an iron tip rolling across stone, Nimlinn roaring.

“Leave it!” said Nimlinn to Twizbang, who had raced over to the staff and was about to pick it up.

Jasper's vision cleared. Nimlinn lowered her paw and gave him a tentative sniff.

“Are you well?” she asked.

Still feeling a little dazed, Jasper looked down at his crooked fingers. They were stiff, and he had to press them against themselves and his chest to make them flex. The feeling of dread had passed, but in its place remained an unpleasant sickness, as though he had just thrown up. He looked into Nimlinn's enormous eyes.

“I d- d- don’t think I’ll be needing one of those after all,” he said in a quaking voice.

“Good,” she answered briskly. “Then if you require nothing else, I believe we are finished here.”

Snerliff and Twizbang helped Jasper to his feet. He was a little wobbly at first, and his knotted forearms could have used a good massage.

“I’m all right,” he said. “You can let go.” Jasper looked up to Nimlinn. “If it’s all right with you, Your Majesty, I’ll be departing from here.”

“It is not all right!” snapped Nimlinn.

Jasper looked confused. “What?”

“If you were to be separated from that coin, and someone else were to use it, someone dangerous, to return to—”

“They would appear in this room!” blurted Jasper, recognition dawning on his face.

“That is correct.”

“Of course, how stupid of me. From where, then?”

“Someplace safe to both of us. I will take you.”

Nimlinn sped Jasper up the long stairwell, through the Palace Keep, and onto the lower ramparts, stopping just outside the Ridgegate.

“There is always a watch here. I will instruct the guards to be on the lookout for you or Lily and to conduct you safely to the Palace on your return.”

“And if someone else should come into possession of the coin?”

“Then they will be ready for that, too. Delivering a single

soul, even a powerful one, to our very doorstep is a risk I'm willing to take to guard your safety."

Jasper unbuttoned his new vest and drew out the pendant, palmed it, and flipped the fob that restrained the pincers. The little ring of gold moons shimmered a silvery white.

"Do you have a plan, Jasper?" asked Nimlinn.

"I need to follow in Lily's footsteps, to see what she's seen. Finding our uncle is priority one. He alone has all the answers."

"You could be heading into danger. Dain is a dangerous moon."

"Lily would have warned me if she thought I might be in danger."

"Things change."

"It hasn't been very long. Besides, I can't let worry make my decisions for me. I'll be on my guard."

Nimlinn smiled. "May your shadows be few, and your pads be silent."

"Thank you, Your Majesty, for all your help."

Nimlinn tipped her head ever so slightly. "You may call me Nimlinn, little Dain cub."

Jasper spun the moons, aiming the pointer at Dain, and snapped the fob shut. His last thoughts on Barreth were about his parents, and how he could never explain being so late. But he had to know what Lily knew, because the more he learned about the Moon Realm, the less he liked the idea of handing the moon coin over to his father.

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