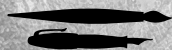


CHRIS D'LACEY

THE ERTH DRAGONS

THE WEARLE

BOOK ONE



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“Fold down your wings,” per Grogan said. He was huddled up almost in the shape of an egg, his words gruff and hard to hear against the wind. His gnarled old feet, missing the third claw on the left side, were barely visible beneath the curve of his chest. His scales lay taut against his aged sides, flattened down for warmth, less open to the wind. Yawning, he said, “It might be nightfall before Grystina calls. You need to conserve your energy for battle. You’re supposed to be presenting a measure of pride, not hopping about like a giddy wearling. It will not look well if you fall off this mountain before you have the chance to raise your claws against G’vard.”

“I can’t settle,” said Gabriel, letting the wind lift his wings to their maximum. His underwings, which were the color of blue ice water, glinted in the frost-cooled sun. Across the valley, where the snowcapped mountains were arranged in a wave as blunt and uneven as per Grogan’s teeth, G’vard would be waiting with his second, per Gorst. All that stood between them was a strip of fine cloud and this deep pool of air. Far below, safe in her birthing cave, the matrial dragon, Grystina, was curled around her hatching eggs. As soon as they broke, she would call for a guardian to protect her young, a dragon

to be her companion for life, a dragon who would have the right to call himself Father.

Gabrial was nine Ki:meran turns old, half the age of his powerful opponent. He was also a blue, technically a minor in dragon years, a turn or so away from the first blush of green that would earn him the status of roamer, a dragon free to fly where he chose. But the Wearle had known guardian blues before—most notably Gabrial's father, Garon, who had never quite lost the blue tints on his underwings and had always been classified by that color.

When he thought about his father, Gabrial's wings did lower. Garon had been among the first Wearle of dragons to visit this planet, an expedition whose fate was still shrouded in mystery. For some reason, as yet undetermined, contact with them had ended abruptly. On the dragons' homeworld of Ki:mera, the Elders had consulted and decided to send a second, larger party to investigate.

Among the sixty who arrived on Erth were mappers, healers, roamers, three Elders, two representatives of the intelligent class of dragons known as De:allus, and an entire wyng of fighting dragons called the Veng. The new Wearle immediately colonized a mountain range close to the open sea, just as their predecessors had. Three phases of the moon had passed, but they had found no trace of the missing dragons. And while the search for them was the highest priority

that Gabriel and his companions faced, all other rituals were being observed—including the raising of young.

“Your impatience will be your undoing,” sighed Grogan. He belched and a curl of smoke rose from one nostril. “The whole Wearle expects you to lose this contest. If you’re happy to prove them right from the outset, then flap away and be done with it.”

“I’m not intending to lose,” said Gabriel, clawing slivers of gray shale loose from the ground on which he was perched. Such was the heat pouring off his body that most of the snow around him had melted, paring back the crisp white surface to its wet gray underbelly. “Why are you here if you believe that I will?”

Per Grogan belched again. “Tradition demands you have a second for a fight like this. Someone has to see to it you don’t make a fool of yourself. Rightly or wrongly, I promised your father before he left Ki:mera with the first Wearle that I would watch over you until your scales turned green—a reckless statement I might yet have cause to regret. What will be the most damaging, I wonder: following you here or the prospect of ridicule if this one-sided ‘contest’ does not go well?”

“At least I put myself forward,” growled Gabriel, spitting orange-tipped embers around his feet. He watched a pair of roamers set down on a peak due east of him. Once Grystina

gave her call, this entire ring of mountains would be filled with dragons, keen to observe the battle for her.

“And for that you have my respect,” said Grogan, tipping his gray head forward a little, “but don’t let this brief flirtation with glory puddle your brain. You’re only here because the more eligible young dragons know what the outcome would be if *they* fought G’vard. They applaud you while blowing a snort of relief.”

Gabrial barreled his chest. “I courted Grystina and she did not reject me, therefore I have to fight for her. My father would be proud of me.”

“Your father was impetuous,” Grogan sighed, his scales clattering quietly as the wind got under them. “A quality you seem to have inherited in plenty. But even he would accept it takes more than raw courage to defeat an opponent as powerful as this. G’vard will put your tail in a knot if you try to blaze your way past him. Stick to the tactics we devised and you’ll, hopefully, survive with your wings unclipped. An honorable defeat is no shame, believe me. Put up a good display and the Elders might give you a wyng to command. Think of it as a training exercise, practice for the battle you *really* want to win.”

Gabrial tightened his eye ridges slightly. “What do you mean?”

“Some matches are more appropriate than others,” muttered

Grogan, looking across the valley for signs of movement. “We both know your second heart beats for another.”

Gabrial gulped and ingested a wisp of smoke, passing it out through the spiracles that lined the sides of his neck. He stared into the open sky as if mesmerized by a drifting cloud. His soft blue eyes, yet to develop their jeweled state, barely moved as he thought about what Grogan had said.

Three females had come to Erth with this Wearle. One was Grystina. Another was the aging queen, Gossana, a dragon so fearsome even the Veng avoided her. And then there was Grendel, the youngest of the three, whose primary role was to assist Grystina throughout her laying cycle and beyond. Whenever Gabrial thought about Grendel, the scales around his snout turned a deep shade of green. He couldn’t hide the change in his coloring now.

Without looking at his charge, per Grogan said, “I have seen the admiration you have for Grendel—and the regard she reserves for you.”

“Really?” Gabrial said, slipping forward as his feet danced on the wet rocks. “You’ve spoken to her? She—?”

Before he could go on, a screech wound up from the pit of the valley, clawing at every fissure of rock along its way.

“That’s Grystina. She’s ready. Prepare yourself,” said Grogan.