

Dragon's-Eyes

Margaret Ronald

“It’s an easy question.” Skald leaned across to adjust the boot. “All Michel wants to know is if you speak the language. Just a yes or no will do.”

The man strapped to the table spoke through clenched teeth. “Not that simple.”

“Really? That’s a shame. Well, I’m sure we can make it that simple.” He turned and pulled out a drawer, standing aside so the contents were visible.

There was a knock at the door. “Bronze Michel wants to see you,” someone said through it.

“Me or him?” Skald asked without looking up.

“You.”

“Be there in a minute.” He left the drawer open and gave the man a pat on the shoulder. “I’ll try not to take too long.”

The man on the table didn’t whimper—he’d got a while to go before that—but the thin keening sound came close to it. Skald closed the door and pulled off his hood, then began the long process of strapping his blades back on and jamming his feet into his boots. The last took longer than he liked; Skald couldn’t bend as easily as he had at thirty, and he couldn’t straighten up as quickly as he had at forty.

Bronze Michel was waiting down the hall, weighting down the edges of a map on a long table. “Six-Blade,” he said as Skald entered. “You took your time. Any luck?”

“Not yet. Why the interruption?”

“Close the door.” Skald did so, and Michel upended a bag onto the map, spilling red and gold stones across it. He picked up a few and let them fall through his fingers. “You know what these are?”

“If they’re still what they were when we were both razormen, they’re dragon’s-eyes.” He caught the flicker of annoyance across Michel’s face; the man didn’t care to be reminded of the days when he was little more than a young street tough with ambition and a gift for bringing others into his net. “They’re pretty, but useless. Can’t put them in jewelry, not unless you want the nobles crying upstart on you; can’t wear them for the same reason; can’t even sell them to a far-trader for more than a couple of coppers.” Not that he hadn’t tried, but the traders hadn’t considered them valuable. Only city nobles did, and Skald had long since stopped caring about them. “Why? Planning on courting the old nobility?”

“Hm? No.” Michel stirred the heap of stones with a forefinger. They rattled together, light washing

over their clear, smooth surfaces. “Do you know why they’re called that?”

Skald shrugged. “Never bothered. Probably same reason whores get called night blossoms.” He eyed Michel, marking the man’s quiet concentration. “This doesn’t have to do with your dragons, does it?”

“My dragons?” Bronze Michel shook his head and tapped the stones, making a sound like bird bones clacking. “No one’s seen a dragon within city limits for centuries. Don’t you listen to any of the stories?”

“Not when you listen for me.”

Michel let the joke pass. These days, when it came to dragons or anything else having to do with the old royals, he lacked a sense of humor. “Dragon’s-eyes must be more than just pretty stones with a pretty name, Skald. I’ve found out who brings them into the city. I want you to learn everything you can about where they come from.” He cleared away the dragon’s-eyes, tracing a path along the map. “You’ll have to leave for a bit, but I’ll put you in touch with a man in Wullfort.”

Skald bent over the map, examining the route Michel had indicated. “North. There’s not much up north—just knifegrass and yokels who think screwing a cow is the high point of the day. Nothing good comes out of the north.”

Michel smiled, but only briefly. “The old royals did.” Skald snorted. “And their dragons.”

“Yeah.” Skald scratched the back of his head with rusty fingernails. “That’s why you’re sending me. Because of this dragon obsession of yours.”

The smile returned. “I’m sending you because I trust you.”

Their eyes met across the jewel-strewn map, and Skald chuckled. “All right, then. Speaking of dragons, if I’m leaving tomorrow, I’ve got some work to finish tonight.”

It took him more time to unstrap the blades and pry off the boots, and by the time he was done, he found himself thinking less of dragons and more of a hot drink. Work couldn’t wait, though, and he pulled on the hood nonetheless.

The man on the table hadn’t moved, though he’d tried to. Tear-tracks, some still fresh, cut across the lines of his face. “Please,” he said. “I’ll tell you about the dragons. Just let me go.”

Skald glanced at the steel “beggar’s boot” clamped onto the man’s left foot, at the bulge of flesh above it and the vise that could only tighten further, then at the open drawer and all its tools in plain sight. He nodded. “All right. Tell me, then.”

He leaned down, and the man whispered in his ear. Skald straightened up with a sigh. “You know,” he said, “I believe you. I really do. But the trouble is, Bronze Michel won’t.” He took one of the little gleaming tools from the drawer and held it up to the light. “So I suggest you come up with a lie, and come up with it fast.”

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The master of the wagon train was a woman ten years his junior, though the years of traveling

under the sun had burned her to look his age. Nona also had enough scars to shame a razorman, judging by the healing pink streak over one eye and the fine network of short white lines across her entire left cheek. She listened to his fake story, listened harder to the money he was willing to pay for passage, and finally nodded. “We lost our one of our drovers a few nights back, so you’re welcome to join us. But I’m surprised that you’d want to leave the city. Most razormen don’t leave even to be buried.”

Skald shrugged. “Live this long and you get tired of the city,” he lied.

“Or it gets tired of you. Well, then.” She turned toward the assembled wagons. “Keia!”

A girl scrambled over the backs of the wagons, bounding down from the last with the grace of an athlete. She gave the carved dragons over the city gates a hard look, as if she found their squat viciousness lacking. “Yes, mother?”

“This is Skald Six-Blade. He’ll be coming with us on the run to Wullfort.” She put her arm around the girl’s shoulders. The girl was a younger version of her mother; her hair was a shade darker, and her skin though tanned wasn’t yet scorched. “Six-Blade, this is Keia. Maybe you could give her a lesson or two on how fighting’s done in the city.”

“Nona,” Keia muttered with the intonation common to all exasperated children. “I know all that stuff already.”

Nona shook her head. “The Sisters won’t have taught you this. Take a good look, girl: most razormen don’t make it to thirty, and this man’s lasted twenty years more.”

Keia’s eyes widened at that. Skald nodded to Nona, flicked Reap and Sow from their sheaths, and cut a pattern in the air so fast it was visible only as afterimages of silver. He snapped the blades back, bowed to Keia, and presented her with the tuft of hair he’d cut from her head in the process.

It wasn’t really razorman work, he acknowledged even as Keia laughed and Nona grinned. It was the sort of trick that razormen did in the taverns before heading out to put their knives to real use, the kind of trick that Skald still practiced on his own. And practice or no, it had been a little slower than it ought.

But it had gotten him a place and, judging by the look in Keia’s eyes, a follower.

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They saw their first dragon three weeks out: a speck in the sky like a scrap of rust-colored silk caught by a purposeful wind. Spring had followed them as they plodded north, but the dragons didn’t seem to bother migrating just yet. “Or maybe they’re coming south,” Keia told Skald as they rode in the last wagon, Skald at the reins, Keia keeping him company.

“Dragons don’t come south,” Skald grunted. Not even the sideshows and grotesqueries that made it to the city every summer had a dragon; something about how quick they died in captivity. He’d seen pictures, and every arch in the city had its own heraldic dragon, but never one in the flesh.

Keia shrugged. “They did it once. Back when the royals moved down to the plains.” She pointed. “There’s another.”

“If you say so.” It wasn’t more than a red dot at this distance, crouched just at the edge of the

plain, where the land began to dip into the hummocks and hills that would mark the rest of their trip till they reached Wullfort and the Basin above it. (How a basin could be above a city was something Skald hadn't yet figured, but he decided he'd work it out in time.) Keia had described the route in detail as they trundled along it, in between asking for more stories of the city and showing off her own not inconsiderable knowledge.

"They won't eat unskinned meat, you know," Keia said. "That's how people knew they weren't just animals." She stretched, then hopped off the wagon to walk alongside. One of the riders ahead whistled through his teeth and tossed back a waterskin; Keia caught it easily.

"I knew a man," Skald said without thinking where the story would lead, "back in the city, who sold dragon-skinned leather, the scraps from their kills. If you looked gullible or just couldn't hear so well and thought he was selling dragon-*skin*, he'd charge twice the price."

"That's stupid. The first time anyone told someone about their dragon-skin, they'd learn they'd been cheated."

"Yeah, but he'd still have their money." Skald's smile faded: that man had made a few other claims, ones that had drawn attention. He'd be back at his stall by now, but walking with a stick and scared to death of Bronze Michel. The beggar's boot was effective like that.

Keia was silent a moment, holding on to the side of the wagon as if it was her guide. "Nona sells dragon's-eyes."

Skald raised his eyebrows. "Really, now? I'd always wondered where those came from."

"From Nona." Keia spoke with easy confidence.

And that's how they made it into the city. That was probably Michel's first step; the rest was up to him. Skald flexed his fingers.

"Did you know that none of the old royals could wear a crown unless it had dragon's-eyes on it?" She apparently took his silence for skepticism. "It's true. I looked it up at my old school."

"School?" Dragon's-eyes could wait, he decided. It wasn't as if either of them would be leaving the wagon train soon.

"Nona left me with the Coldwell Sisters when I was born." She said it proudly, as if she were claiming kinship to kings. "They have a school there, for all the lords' bastards and priests' sons. Their library's three stories tall."

"So I guess you learned everything there."

Keia smiled a secret smile. "Not *everything*."

From a different girl, he'd have taken that for a tease; from Keia, though, it seemed to hold another meaning. Skald gazed at her, thinking of the children he hadn't had, the sisters he'd left. Would they have been as strange and alive as this girl?

Keia noticed his interest and cocked her head to the side, considering him as she'd considered the stone dragons on the city gates. "Why does my mother call you Six-Blade? You've only got four."

Skald smiled. “Not quite.” He shifted the reins so that he could gesture freely. “This is Reap,” he said, touching the blade on his left forearm. “This is Sow. This—” left hip, “is Wail. And this—” right hip, “is Moan.” He reached behind his back and unshipped the small, cruelly curved blade that rested there. “And this last is Mercy.”

“That’s still only five.”

“They did teach you well at that school.” He sat back and drew up one leg and rested it ankle on knee, so that one large boot faced Keia. “The sixth’s name is Surprise.” He flexed his foot.

Keia stared at the crescent of steel shining just past the toe of Skald’s boot. “Oh.”

“You’re lucky.” Skald flexed his toes back into their usual cramped state, and the blade retracted. It hurt more than it should have—he limped in the mornings now, which he hadn’t two years back. “Most people only see it after I’ve kicked them. And then of course there’s my seventh blade, but you’re a little too young to see *that*.” He winked at her.

“Oh. *Oh!*” Keia laughed, loud and a little shocked at herself. From her place several wagons ahead, Nona looked back at them with raised eyebrows, but she was smiling.

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The story about Skald’s “seventh blade” made it through the camp in a night, as did the rumor that Nona had played the part of its sheath. This last wasn’t true, though Nona had invited him to her wagon a few times to share a pipe of bitterleaf. She had a filthy sense of humor and a surprising giggle when startled into laughter, something that Skald tried to do at every opportunity and succeeded at only a fifth of the time.

He gave little thought to finding out more about dragon’s-eyes. Better to leave it untouched for now, he believed, than to push too hard and incur Nona’s suspicion. So he told himself, and enjoyed the journey, forgetting origin and destination both.

It wasn’t until they were two weeks out from Wullfort that he remembered, and that only because of the dragon. One of his oxen had demonstrated the intelligence of its kind and had wandered through a patch of knifegrass, lowing anxiously once it realized what was happening. Skald cursed everything about the north and bound the dumb animal’s cuts, but it was still lame, and thus his wagon lagged well behind the rest.

They weren’t quite so far behind, though, that he couldn’t tell when something had happened. Rafe, the one with the lazy eye, even stood up in his wagon and tried to signal to Skald, waving both arms like a deranged puppeteer before his partner dragged him down.

Keia ran up to him. “Dragon’s hunting,” she said, out of breath but still alight, as she was with any news of dragons. “Nona says to stop and wait until he goes over.”

“What, so we can make an easy meal for it?”

She shook her head. “They don’t attack humans; they don’t like anything we’ve touched. All the stories say so. And it won’t attack *me*.”

“Sure it won’t,” Skald said, or started to. A huge buck, antlers still dangling scraps of their winter velvet, charged around the side of the closest hill. Behind it came the dragon.

It hung so low in the air that its claws split furrows in the long grass, wings sweeping the air like bloody sails. All down the train, oxen lowed and balked, and the drovers flattened themselves against the boards. The buck screamed and ran straight for the treeline—and for Skald’s wagon. “Keia, get down!” Skald yelled.

She only stared.

Skald was almost ready to let the oxen bolt and grab Keia instead when the buck faltered half a wagon’s length from them. Two sets of black-stained talons, each as long as Wail or Moan, sank into it, and the deer went down with one last strangled cry. The oxen lurched and strained, but the dragon ignored them, settling down to pare the skin from its prey like an urchin with an orange.

The reins went slack in Skald’s hands as his oxen froze. “Keia,” he whispered, “don’t make any sudden moves—” He turned his head in time to see Keia walking toward the dragon.

She approached the dragon slowly, hands held out as if in surrender. It was nearly skeletal, skin stretched over long bones and tattered wings flapping like the gaunt-children in the midwinter parades. It looked up and blinked at her through milky, opaque eyes. “Hello,” Keia said. “It’s me.”

The dragon snorted, hot bloodied breath so powerful it struck Skald in the face even from this distance. He rose, still clutching the reins. “By all that’s unholy, girl—”

The dragon’s head snapped up to glare at him. It hissed, sank its claws deep into the dead buck, and leapt into the air. Keia ducked away from the carcass, and spots of blood splattered over Skald as the dragon flew overhead. It disappeared into the woods, still dragging its half-peeled meat.

Keia bounded to her feet. “Did you see? Skald, did you see? They know me. They recognize me—”

“I saw.” Skald was suddenly exhausted, weary to the bone, as if a score of evenings had settled on him at once. “Go up to your mother. Tell her we’re fine. Get.”

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Keia didn’t speak of her bravery, if bravery it was, and the other drovers either hadn’t seen or weren’t talking about it. Skald, though, couldn’t shake the dread he’d felt, and so he went to Nona. To his surprise, Nona just laughed. “Good for her! She knows dragons don’t eat humans; she’s not about to shriek and run like a fragile city girl.”

“It was more than that,” Skald insisted. “She was reckless. She deliberately put herself in danger.”

“I didn’t send Keia to the Coldwell Sisters just so she’d learn to be a fainting idiot. They’re good teachers, and Keia’s a good learner. She knows what she’s doing.” Nona sighed and patted Skald’s shoulder. “Look, I know you mean well, but this isn’t the city.”

Skald just shook his head. “It was a stupid thing to do.”

Nona regarded his sour expression and sighed. “Six-Blade, if you were any more protective I’d

think *you* were her mother. I just have more faith in her than you do.” She squeezed his shoulder. “And she certainly shouldn’t fear anything from dragons.”

He didn’t get far from Nona’s wagon before noticing Rafe watching him. “Worried about the girl?” Rafe asked.

Skald grimaced. “Yes.” It was an uncomfortable feeling, not something he was used to.

Rafe grinned. “She’s no trouble. She’s her mother’s girl, in’t she? And Nona’s never said boo to a dragon.” He tapped the side of his nose. “Special that way.”

“Special.” Later he’d think it was his temper that made him pry so clumsily; later still he’d wonder if it was deliberate, if he didn’t really want to find out what he’d been sent to learn. “Is that how she brings in the dragon’s-eyes? Because she’s special? Special like the royals were, the royals and their dragons?”

Rafe’s face closed down, and he lowered his hand. “That’s nowt of my business, and less of yours.” He folded his arms and leaned back against the wagon.

I could make you tell me, Skald thought. You value your hands—two twists with the small screws, at most, and you’d be squealing. I could make you tell me.

Something in his face must have hinted at his thoughts. Rafe paled, pressing himself against the wagon’s side to get further away from Skald. Skald blinked, and the lens of the city slid away from his vision. He walked away without an explanation, the weight of his blades dragging at his steps.

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It only got worse. The farther they traveled from the city, the more his old trade seemed to distort what he saw, forcing the faces he’d learned over the last few weeks to conform to the city vision. *This one will break after a day, he would find himself thinking as the other drovers hailed him. This one will only need to be shown the instruments. This one is strong, but he favors his left knee; use the hammers first. This one will beg. This one will not break on his own, but hurt any member of his family and he’ll tell you anything just so you’ll stop.*

Had he always looked at people in this way? Or had he only learned to do so, to keep himself from seeing the faces behind the men Bronze Michel deemed unnecessary? And there had been so many of those—rivals for the razormen at first, then the heads of those gangs, then others, and others.... Were dragons even necessary for Bronze Michel, now?

He thought of a man strapped to a table, whispering his secret, the secret Bronze Michel would not have believed.

Keia helped him, though she didn’t know it. She told stories over the fire in the evenings, talking while Nona smoked and nodded approval. In the firelight he couldn’t see how thin Keia’s wrists were, how easily they’d break. And the stories did distract him, enough that sleep could come.

Mostly stories about dragons, now that he noticed it.

They made the long climb up to Wullfort in time for the festival, and once there the whole train had stories to match Keia’s. The mountain slope went up further, claimed one of the drovers, up to the Basin,

a crater a thousand leagues wide and brimming with smoke. There the dragons held their yearly parliament, and always they agreed to slaughter humanity, but they always forgot about it within a week, and so that one week was the only time dragons were dangerous to people. No, said another, the basin used to be a lake, and the dragons people living on it, but their tempers were so fiery that they burnt it all up. No, said another, that was all rubbish, but the truth was dragons were hatched here, and they killed any who came near the eggs. More than enough dragons for Keia's taste.

Keia had a story of her own, though, and one that she held till Skald had settled in, as if it were just for him. It was an old one, about how the first royal's grandfather had given his daughter to be eaten by a dragon.

"But the princess was smart," Keia said, her eyes flashing in the firelight. "So she put on twelve dresses, one over the next. And the dragon, seeing her unfit for eating, told her 'Princess, take off your dress!' And she said in return, 'Dragon, take off your skin!' And he did, and she did."

One of the drovers grinned and nudged another. Skald glared at them both.

"And so they did again, down to the twelfth dress and the twelfth skin, but by that point the dragon had shed all that made him a dragon, and was only a man. And they lay together, man and wife, and in the morning the king gave his kingdom over to them." She leaned forward and stirred the fire. "And from them came the line of royals, who united the plains and ruled for centuries. And it was said that no one who lacked dragon's blood in their ancestry could hope to rule the plains ever after."

Skald thought back to the city and Bronze Michel's private obsession. He ruled most of the city now, and even if the old nobility remained, it was one thing to rule through them and another to rule in your own name. And so he'd gone to Skald, whom he trusted as much as anyone. *Go follow up about dragon's-eyes. Find out whether the dragons really are migrating further south in the winter. Get the names of those families with dragons in their heraldry. Here's the name of a man who claims he knows the secret language of dragons; see if he's telling the truth.*

He winced outright at that last memory. Keia turned her bright smile on him. "That's why the dragon's-eyes were in the crowns, Skald. That's a royal lineage if there ever was."

"Maybe," he grunted. "Seems to me there's no great honor in saying your great-great-grandmother fucked a lizard."

Keia's eyes went wide with shock and fury, and wider still when the drovers burst out laughing. She leapt up and ran away from the fire, but not so quickly that Skald couldn't hear her first sobs.

Enough of this. Skald got to his feet and went to find Nona. She'd set up a real tent, not a half-wagon as they'd used on the road. A wide, flat chest served as a table, and Nona stood beside it, inspecting a pair of heavy leather greaves, the kind that fighters in the ring used if they weren't forbidden armor. A blunt dagger, its tip squared off like a chisel's, lay beside them. "Evening, Six-Blade. Hold this, will you?"

She handed him the greaves and bent down to check the laces. Skald cleared his throat. "I think we've reached the end of our deal," he said.

"Have we? Oh, the passage to Wullfort. Yes, that's done." She pulled out a rotting lace and grimaced. "I wouldn't mind keeping you on, though."

“That’s kind of you.”

“Kind?” She snaked a new lace through the greaves. “I don’t take on anyone who’s no good, and I’d rather keep the best. Besides, Keia likes you.”

Skald grimaced at that, but let it go. “I shouldn’t,” he said. “I have business in Wullfort, and once that’s done, I’ll be headed back to the city.”

“Will you, now?” She set the greaves down and regarded him. “And here I was thinking your business was with me.”

Skald didn’t move. “And what would that be?”

“Dragon’s-eyes. Or so I’d thought. Am I wrong?”

He closed his eyes. The instinct of years in the city told him to cover his tracks in the way only a razorman could; the Skald of ten years ago would have done so already. “No,” he said, opening his eyes again, trying to see her without the lens of the city. “You’re not wrong.”

Nona nodded. “Ha. I wondered if that Bronze man was getting ideas.”

He forced a smile. “You see things pretty clearly.”

“I have to see things as they are, Six-Blade. You start seeing things that aren’t there, you miss the stuff that’s there.” She tapped her chin thoughtfully. “For example, I know where you keep that seventh blade of yours.” Her grin narrowed. “It’s in the other boot, isn’t it?”

Skald stared at her, then laughed. “Yes. Yes, it is.” He flexed both feet, and the two Surprises gleamed in the lantern light. “Usually people only see one, or if they’ve seen it in the left they assume I switched it to the right. They’ll tell themselves anything so that they don’t have to admit to missing something.”

“Thought as much.” She shrugged. “Well, you can tell your man in the city that if he wants dragon’s-eyes, I’ll bring them to him same as to any other. I’ll even give him a discount. And if you change your mind, I’ll be here this time next year.” Her smile curled, became very like Keia’s secret one. “I’m always here for the Spring Festival. Luck.”

“Luck.”

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Despite what he’d said to Nona, Skald didn’t leave the wagon train right away. He stayed in his own small tent for a day, long enough for Nona and Keia’s noon argument. Nona wore the long greaves that he’d seen the night before, and anyone who’d ever been a parent or child could follow the conversation: why can’t I, you said you’d, it’s not fair. Nona finally tousled Keia’s hair and walked off, up the slope away from the walls, ignoring Keia’s protests.

He didn’t go into Wullfort, saying his goodbyes instead, trying to keep the last of the journey as a shield. But word moved faster than he did, and when he returned late in the evening there was a note tacked to the center post of his tent. It was from a man in Wullfort, a man very like a younger version of Bronze Michel. It expressed interest in “a man of such skill” coming to town, and suggested a few clients

he could “see to.” It named a place, and a time, and a price.

It didn't name him as Skald Six-Blade; that name belonged to a razorman, one who might have the sins of razormen to his name but no more than that. And he wasn't a razorman to the gangs of Wullfort, not now that he was close to threescore years; his edge was gone, and in the slums and gardens of the city you lived or died by that edge. This man wanted him for his other trade, the one with drawers full of little bright tools and tables with straps at the corners.

Could he have one trade and not the other? He'd kept his blades clean, he'd never brought them into his work, left them outside the door when he put on his hood. It should have meant more than it did.

Skald folded the letter into five parts, so that ill luck couldn't find its way out, and tucked it into his shirt. When he left his tent, he saw a flicker of movement on the hill. Keia.

He watched her a moment, then went back and took the long leather leggings from his pack. They weren't as good as ringfighters' greaves, but they had turned aside knives and teeth and worse. A moment's work fastened them on, and he checked all of his blades before setting out.

He followed her over the moonlit ground, watching the flicker of her lantern. He wasn't much of a woodland tracker, but Keia wasn't bothering to hide her tracks. Unfortunately, his skill at being silent didn't help when a stick found its way under his foot and snapped in two.

Skald cursed, and Keia, halfway up a rock spur, spun and lost her footing. Her cry of surprise told him all he needed to know. “Don't move!” he called. “Keia, don't move.”

“Hell with you,” she said, but there was a thin, high edge of pain and panic to her voice, and she stayed put. She had fallen on her side with one foot tucked under her, in the midst of a patch of silver-edged grass, limned by more than moonlight. One tuft brushed her elbow, and a thin line of blood followed it.

“You've fallen in knifegrass,” Skald said. “See those edges? The grass makes a little knife, and it's serrated, so it cuts quick. Stay where you are and I'll come get you.”

She made a high-pitched noise, but didn't argue. He wrapped a leather strap around one hand, trying to judge just how much knifegrass he'd need to push out of the way. Knifegrass and cow-screwdrivers and dragons, that's all that you found in the north.... Bronze Michel had tried to transplant knifegrass to his garden, all along the inside wall, but it'd died in the next hot summer....

He waded into the grass, the blades sawing at his leggings, and helped Keia onto his back. As soon as they were onto safe stone, Keia kicked him, and he let her slide down. “What are you doing here?” she demanded.

“Following you.”

“This is none of your business! I have to—” She caught herself. “My mother's up there. I have to see her.”

“Up there?” He glanced over his shoulder, to the long slope rising up to the crater. “You know, if people tell you that no one ever goes to a place, maybe you ought to figure out why first. That's all knifegrass up there.” He nodded to her clothes—festival wear, unsuited for even the lightest of hikes. “Those'll get torn to ribbons in five strides.”

She glared at him, but her lower lip trembled. “I have to go up there.”

Skald regarded her a moment longer. “You’ll do it whether I say yea or nay?” She nodded. “Then I’ll take you up the path.”

“You will? I—” She stopped. “You can’t tell anyone. Not a living soul.”

“I promise,” Skald told her.

He carried her up the slope, through the knifegrass. Below them, Wullfort was a blot on the hillside, lit here and there by faint gleams of torches, people up too late or too early. Moonlight gave way to pale dawn, and then to the first gleams of real dawn. The last stretch up to the basin wasn’t steep, but it was thick with knifegrass, so thick that blades began to find their way between the lacings of his leggings, scoring his legs with fine red lines.

Smell had never been the best of Skald’s senses, even before years of city smoke. So it wasn’t until they reached the very edge of the basin that he caught the hot bloody reek of dragon. He stopped dead, and Keia slid from his back with a cry of joy.

Fluttering gaunt wings and scaly hides filled the entire basin, a bowl scooped out of the hilltop maybe a thousand feet across. The closer dragons, gray and milky-eyed, turned slowly and without curiosity to look at them; on the far side of the basin, past a wide swath of knifegrass, a cluster of bright red and brown dragons twitched away, watching the sky like rabbits in an open field.

And between the clusters of dragons, knee-deep in thick knifegrass, Nona stood above a fallen dragon.

It writhed against the grass, shreds of gray gossamer peeling away from its wings. Nona bent over its neck, pinning it down with her knees. She raised her hand, and the blunted dagger caught the first of the dawn light.

“No—” Keia choked, but Skald caught her by the shoulder.

Nona brought the dagger down at the dragon’s eye with a sound like bones breaking. She pried at the dragon’s muzzle, then brought the dagger down again, and again. With each stroke, the thick plates of skin creased and folded, glittering like a freakish mask. It twitched beneath her, until the shreds of skin clinging to its limbs had fallen away to catch and tear upon the knifegrass.

Nona struck a last time, tucked her dagger away, and carefully stroked the dragon’s snout. Under her hands, the hard scales fell away to reveal bright new ones. The dragon closed its eyes and stretched like a cat, and Nona got to her feet, still holding thick fragments of horn and scale, rounded like stones.

“Dragon’s-eyes,” Skald said softly. “I’d wondered.”

Keia pulled away from his grasp. “Nona! Nona, I knew it—”

“Stay where you are.” Nona held up a fistful of dragon’s-eyes and crossed the knifegrass to reach her daughter. “They’re skittish just after molting. It’s not safe to come too close.”

Skald, not wanting to risk skittish dragons whether they’d molted or not, followed more slowly.

Nona nodded to him. “Didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Didn’t expect to come up here.” It was what Bronze Michel called a bloodless answer; information gained too easily, and therefore suspect. *I believe you, but he won’t.... I suggest you start lying.* He looked away, out at the dragons, and for the first time in weeks let himself fully remember what the man on the table had told him, before he’d left the city. *The dragons had a language.*

“Well, then.” She stripped off her gloves and turned to face her daughter, shutting him out. “So, you found your way up here.”

“I did.” Keia fairly glowed.

“Good for you. I’d planned to do this after molting, but we can talk now.” She nodded to the waiting dragons. “They know where to come for the molting, even if they don’t always do it. You can see a few have gone a while without it—like that one, with the horns. They can get most of the old skin off, but it always takes someone else to get the rest. Lucky us, we get to help.”

Keia wasn’t listening. Even though Skald had compared her to his nonexistent daughters all through the trip, for the first time he saw something of himself in her—the young razorman, new to the city, not listening to anyone who told him what could happen there. Not listening, and learning anyway.

She shook her head, smiling at the dragons as if sharing a secret with them. “That’s not why I came.”

Nona stuck her gloves in her belt and shifted the dragon’s-eyes from one hand to the other. “No?”

She beamed and bowed, ceremoniously, as if some ritual had begun. “Nona—mother—I’ve come to meet my father.”

Nona blinked at her. “Your father? The tinker outside Fenworth?”

Keia shook her head. “You don’t have to pretend any more. I can be trusted to know—I made my way up here—” She glanced back at Skald. “Skald, go away, you shouldn’t hear this.”

Nona still looked bewildered. Skald settled onto one of the boulders that dotted the basin. “She means a dragon.”

“*What?*”

“You guessed!” Keia laughed and gave Skald a quick hug. “I knew it—I knew you understood, even after what you said—”

Nona looked from Skald to Keia to the dragons and back. “Keia, girl, that’s not how it is. Maybe it was once, a long time ago, I don’t know. But it’s not—”

Keia turned back to her mother, the first hints of doubt breaking on her countenance. “You sent me away,” Keia said, almost pleading now. “You sent me away, but I still figured it out. I knew you always come to the Spring Festival here, and that’s when the Dragon’s Parliament is—and look, it’s here! And I knew there was more to where dragon’s-eyes came from, that you had to know their secrets to find them. And I was born at midwinter—” She caught her breath. “You had to be part of it, part of

the great story of the dragons and the old royals—”

Skald thought of the Coldwell Sisters’ school full of fosterlings, all with some great tale behind them, some history illuminating the road before them. Of a young girl among them, who knew only that her mother ran a wagon train. No glory there. No mystery. And out of the stories of dragons that had so infested the land, she’d made her own legend, her own truth, her own special destiny....

And he looked at Nona, who was so good at seeing what was really there. So good that she couldn’t understand how what *wasn’t* there could have power. “Nona,” he said, getting to his feet.

“I don’t understand,” Nona said. “You don’t think—Keia girl, I come up here each spring to help with the molting. In return I get these.” She held up the dragon’s-eyes, red and gold gleaming through her fingers as if lit by their own fire. “There’s only a few places they come for the molting, and there’s only a few people who know how to help.”

“But there’s more to it. There has to be.” Keia flung her arms out toward the dragons, as if to draw them all close to her. “Why else would they come here, why else would dragon’s-eyes be royal?”

Nona shrugged. “If there was a reason, I never knew it, and neither did my old master.”

Keia’s face crumpled. “That’s it? That’s all there is—just some cheap trade?”

Like razormen are just glorified thugs. Skald took a step forward. “Nona, Keia, I think maybe—”

“It’s a long and proud tradition.” Nona reached out to her daughter, hands still brimming with horn and scale.

Keia knocked her hand away, scattering dragon’s-eyes across the grass. “No! No, you’re wrong—I’ll prove it, the dragons know me, they recognize me—”

She turned and darted toward the bright dragons, heedless of the knifegrass. “Look, I’m here, I’ve come! It’s me, Keia Dragonsdaughter—”

“Keia, *no!* Not that way!”

Skald was already on his feet, running after her—but he was too slow, or too old, or maybe, maybe, had too much of a sense of self-preservation to follow her with all his speed.

The newly-molted dragon reared up away from her. Keia didn’t see, or saw it as something else, a greeting maybe. It lashed out—Skald caught a glimpse of claws, this time white and clean—and Keia fell.

Nona’s scream caught as if snagged on those claws. Skald clutched her as she ran past. “No, no, stop. Let me do this.” He shoved Nona back and walked forward, arms outstretched.

The dragon blinked once, sluggish as its unmolted fellows, and withdrew its claws. It nudged Keia’s limp body with the tip of one claw. The slim jaws parted as if to utter a malediction, but all that emerged was a confused, warbling hiss.

The dragons had a language, the man strapped to the table had told him. They had a language, a long time ago. But every time they killed a human, they lost another few words, and so

eventually they forgot how to speak. They're just animals now. It's the truth, the truth, I swear it.

Skald hadn't believed him then, in spite of what he'd said. But he knew it to be true now. He crouched by Keia's body, as he had when pulling her from the knifegrass. Her eyes were open, still wide with conviction, and he closed them.

The dragon hissed again, almost but not quite forming words. *I know you*, he thought, and raised his eyes to meet the dragon's gaze. *I know how it works. You do something awful, maybe because you're angry or you're scared or someone told you it was the only way. And then you regret it, but not enough to keep from doing it the next time.*

He got to his feet, Keia's body in his arms. *So you keep doing it, and regretting it, and the rust builds up and the blades thin under it, and one day you forget you ever could speak.* Skald's reflection in the dragon's eye blurred, and he didn't think it was the dragon's doing.

He turned, crossed the grass, and laid Keia at its edge, then turned his back while Nona knelt beside her daughter. Her chest hitched twice, and she turned away, toward the dragons. "Get out!" she screamed. "Go, go, get out!"

The dragons flinched, a ripple spreading out from her. One by one, they turned and flew or crawled out of the basin, trailing shreds of skin and scale, straining wings that were too new to fly. The last few, graying and thick-plated, waited in futile hope, then dragged themselves away through knifegrass. In the shadow of departing dragons, Nona stroked her daughter's brow and cried, and Skald turned away, not wanting to hear.

After some time, because Nona was a pragmatic person even in grief, she began gathering stones for a cairn. Skald helped without speaking, then as the cairn grew, took a seat beside it. Wail and Moan were easy to unstrap; Reap and Sow less so, and the lack of Mercy's pressure against his back was like an ache. Cutting the toes from his boots took longer, but in time the two Surprises joined Keia, and he stood, an old unarmed man with nothing.

Nona returned to his side. "I thought I was doing it all the right way," she said without preamble. "I thought she'd learn from the Sisters, and I could teach her what I knew, and it would be right...." She covered her face. "What do we do, Skald? What do we do, when all our work comes to this?"

Skald set the letter from Wullfort on top of the blades and laid a last stone over it all. "The same thing the dragons do," he said. "Shed our skins. Shed our skins, and move on."