

MUCKERS

Smoke curled from the severed ankles of the royal feet still wrapped in the remains of the royal boots. Silver buckles had melted in the blast of flame and pooled like water around the thick royal soles. Stunned silence filled the courtyard, not even the ladies in their finery dared to whimper. The sound of cracking bones echoed off the walls as everyone watched the huge red dragon swallow the King.

I gripped the rusted window bars so tight, my knuckles popped.

‘What’s happening?’ Jax hissed from below. ‘What’s that noise?’

‘She’s eaten him,’ I whispered back. ‘She’s eaten the King *and* the crown!’

‘What?’ Jax tried to climb the slick cell wall but was too small to reach the other window. He slid to the floor and whined. ‘Who’s eaten what?’

The dragon’s golden gaze swept across the crowd. Was she on the search for a dragon rider? Why had the king thought she was looking for him? Everyone knew a dragon chose its rider not the other way around. Her lips curled back revealing two rows of sharp bloody teeth. She raised her head to the sky and bugled a single note. The ground shook and stone vibrated.

‘Get down!’ Jax pleaded. ‘You’ll get a beating if someone sees you.’

‘Trust me.’ I shook my head, ‘no one’s looking this way.’

The dragon spat a stream of flame into the grey overcast clouds. Every courtier and knight turned their faces away from the heat. But I couldn’t take my eyes off Great Red.

The large circular courtyard was deserted, and scorch marks of dragon flame still darkened the cobbles where the king had stood. To the east faint light brightened the sky casting deep shadows across the fortified castle. I shivered in the early morning air. The weight of chain heavy on my shoulders.

‘Stay in line muckers.’ Grunt checked the iron collars fastened around our throats. He stank of ale and wore motheaten wolf skins. His fingers ran along the chain linking us together, Broil, Angus, Ned, his twin Jenna, Jax and me.

We stood in the middle of the courtyard, locked to a cart piled with barrels and boxes.

Angus glanced over his shoulder with the black eye I'd given him. His hands balled into tight fists. I shook my head, this wasn't the time or place to finish our fight.

The grand double doors leading into the main keep opened. Dressed in a thick woollen cloak and colourful satins, Lord Chambers stepped out. Two overstuffed knights wearing glittering armour escorted him towards our ragged line. The Lord wrinkled his nose as he looked at each one of us and cleared his throat. 'You have been chosen.'

I watched him unroll the scroll in his hands and my gut sank. Nothing good ever happened after a proclamation. Chambers started to read. 'Due to the unfortunate demise of King Percival Royce the third of noble house Valentine. You...' He nodded at us. 'You have been chosen to recover the *Royal Crown*.'

The chain pulled tight with tension.

'It is a brave opportunity to redeem your crimes and earn your freedom.'

Crimes? What crimes? We'd been snatched from our families. Thrown into ships. Divided on the south shores and brought here to serve. Some slaves believed they were being ransomed. Others believed they would be rescued. I didn't believe anything and looked for a way to escape.

'Whoever recovers the crown will be given a Royal Pardon as well as ...' the Lord squinted at the scroll. 'Six gold coins, and free passage across the Sapphire Sea.'

The Sapphire Sea? Home... Home was on the other side of the sea.

'That'll be me leaving you muckers.' Angus grinned and flexed his bulbous arm muscles. 'None of you stand a —'

'No *talking!*' Grunt's hand flicked the willow switch he held lashing Angus across the chin. The boy groaned, and didn't say another word

Two men sat in the cart. One clicked his tongue, and the mules standing between the traces perked up. A slap of reins and they started forward, pulling us along.

Thunder rumbled. Rain poured, and the track we walked turned into thick mud. For two days we'd trudged through the desolate valley, where only a few stunted trees and thin

brush dared to grow. On the horizon shrouded by a swirl of low cloud, Dragon's Mount loomed closer.

A shiver ran up my spine, but it wasn't anything to do with my sopping wet clothes. This was a place of legend. A place for dragons and their riders. I thought of Great Red, where was she? What had happened to her after she'd left the castle?

'Look!' Broil's surprised shout made me glance up.

A wing of dragons had launched from the Mount. Flying in a tight 'V' formation they dove through the low clouds, banked right and swooped low. My heart raced as they flew over us without a sound. The lead dragon shone a bright copper. The rest were a mix of green and blues.

They were beautiful, stunning. What would it feel like to bond with a dragon? To ride one? To view the land from the sky? There were stories of dragons that could swim beneath the waves – I walked straight into Jax not realising the cart had stopped. A mass of jagged rock stood in front of us and beyond that, a steep cliff swept upwards towards the Mount.

'Muckers,' Grunt shouted and waved the switch at us. 'Unload the barrels.' He stepped away as the drivers joined him. Both men watched us with deep scowls and loaded crossbows.

'Stay close.' I whispered to Jax. He looked up with large brown eyes, exactly like his sister's. I tried not to think about Shona. Tried to forget her desperate scream as we'd been separated. Jax nodded and we worked with the others.

It didn't take us long to unload.

Grunt unhooked the chain. 'Open them.'

We stood, frozen in the mud and stared at the old barrels.

'Move!' Grunt jerked the chain so hard Broil crashed against the closest one. It tipped over and the lid slid off. A pair of thick leather boots, spilled onto the ground. Grunt sneered, 'You'll need boots an' gloves.'

We flipped the lids and rummaged through the contents. The barrels were full of odd bits of clothing. Where were they sending us? Where did they think the crown was? I found a

pair of long boots and gloves, plus a padded leather vest. Nothing fit Jax, but he pulled on a pair of boots that flapped around his knees and I laced them up for him.

‘Back in line,’ Grunt shouted.

We stood in battered boots and worn gloves. But Angus and Ned also wore dented helmets. Broil had found a rusty old breast plate and Jenna wore a chainmail skirt. Did they think we were going into battle? Or did they know something I didn’t? Grunt heaved on the chain and we stumbled after him, following a weaving path around the rocks. The other men fell in behind, crossbows at the ready.

The back of my neck prickled like someone was watching. I glanced at the shattered rocks lining our way, but nothing moved in the shadows. We turned a sharp corner and the ground fell away into a deep crevasse. Broil groaned.

‘Keep moving!’ Grunt shouted.

Broil shuck his head staring at the drop.

‘Move now –’ Grunt snarled at the skinny boy, ‘... or I’ll *chuck* you over the edge.’

Broil whimpered and started to inch along the narrow path. Step by slow step we crept towards a fraying rope bridge. It spanned across the drop and anchored to an opening in the cliff that looked like a screaming mouth. Thick black liquid spilt over the lower lip staining the slate grey rock beneath it. A putrid stench hung in the air and I tried not to gag.

Grunt stopped at the bridge, and turned to us.

‘Muckers listen ‘cos I’ll only say this *ONCE!*’ Grunt waved a small mage stick in his hand. ‘Yer get one of these. Shake it when yer get inside an’ it’ll light up.’ He nodded over his shoulder. ‘This is the Gutter only one way in an’ out. Follow it ‘til you find the crown an’ bring it back ‘ere.’

The sewer! We were going to search for the crown in the *sewer* of Dragon’s Mount? My insides crawled like a nest of Squelch worms.

Grunt unhooked Broils collar and gave the boy a mage stick. ‘Go on then.’ He pushed Broil out onto the bridge, ‘off yer trot.’

Broil’s face turned white and eyes went wild. He turned, grabbed at the ropes trying to keep his balance as the flimsy bridge bounced and swayed beneath him.

‘Don’t look down.’ I muttered under my breath. ‘Please don’t look down.’

Broil froze in the middle of the bridge.

‘*Move – Move!*’ Grunt roared. ‘*MOVE!*’

Broil stood like an ancient statue.

I heard a crossbow trigger release behind me. Saw the bolt bury itself into Broil’s back. He crumpled forward and slid off the bridge without a sound. I clamped my hands over my mouth determined not to scream, but couldn’t stop tears filling my eyes.

Grunt unhooked Angus.

He snatched the mage light, threw a sneer in my direction and ran across the bridge. I watched him disappear into the Gutter. Would Angus search for the crown? Or find a place for an ambush?

‘Jax, listen quick.’ I leaned forward and kept my voice low as Ned walked across the bridge. ‘When you get across wait for me.’

He nodded and we both watched Jenna follow her twin.

‘Next.’ Grunt unclipped Jax from the chain and gave him a light.

I willed him across the bridge. Don’t slip. Don’t slip. Don’t slip. Jax paused at the end and stared into the darkness. ‘Keep going.’ My shout echoed along the rocks. He glanced back, waved and scrambled into the darkness.

Grunt leaned close. ‘I’ve put a few coins on you.’ His breath smelt worse than the Gutter. He nodded at the other men. ‘But they think you don’t stand a chance.’

‘Guess I’ll prove them wrong then.’

Grunt leered and the drivers laughed. He released my collar and the weight of chain fell from my neck. I stood taller, took the mage light and focused. The bridge creaked with every step and swung with a sickening yawn. I gagged, the stink wrapped around me like a wet blanket, clogging up my nose and filling my mouth.

‘Jax?’ I stood at the entrance and waited. I’d tried to keep him safe, for Shona, for his family. A noise scraped to my right, I spun around and held up the light. Jax blinked in its pale glow.

‘Kells?’ His voice sounded small and fragile.

‘It’s me.’

‘There’s strange noises in here.’ He grabbed my hand, ‘and ... something’s watching.’

‘I think there’s only us in here.’ I hugged him until he stopped shaking. ‘Find a place to hide and wait until I come back’

His eyes grew wide. ‘What if you don’t come *back*?’

‘Have I let you down before?’

Jax shook his head.

‘You remember the whistle?’ It was our secret signal.

‘Yeah.’

‘Find a good hiding place.’ I tried to smile, ‘stay quiet and wait.’

Jax nodded, and turned back the way he’d come.

I watched until his light disappeared, then turned and stared at the Gutter. The flow of muck had cut a narrow channel into the rock but a network of leaking streams had formed small pools along the way. Angus was bound to try something. He’d never leave a fight unfinished. My ribs still ached from our last clash.

I started to climb following the boot prints of the others.

Angus, Ned and Jenna had been thorough. Every shallow pool showed signs of a search, and sludge was slopped all over the rock. What would the crown look like? Squashed? Whole? In bits? I kept my eye on the slow flow of muck running down the channel but there were no blockages or anything that looked new.

The darkness coiled around me, and something rattled in the rocks above.

My heart lurched and started to race. I paused listening with every fibre of my being. But nothing stirred. I looked over my shoulder and the faint speck of daylight that had marked the entrance was gone.

A distant shriek ripped at the silence. It grew louder and louder.

I held up my light. A pale fleshy body with leathered wings and large claws flew past. *Vezpri*? They were like bats but hairless, vicious and bigger – much bigger.

Another flew by ... and another... and another.

I ducked beneath an outcrop of rock and watched a swarm fly towards me. They swooped and dived holding something in their claws – Pecking – Tearing – Grabbing at a *body* – it was Ned! His battered old helmet plopped into the muck at my feet. A scream stuck in my throat, and I pressed against the cold stone until the swarm had vanished.

Footsteps rang on the rocks and splashed through the sludge. '*Ned?* – *NED?*' Jenna called out. She grabbed the helmet sliding to a stop in front of me.

'He's gone.' My voice was a broken whisper.

Jenna spun around and stared straight at me. 'Where is he? What have you done?'

'Couldn't do anything,' I flicked my light in the direction the *Vezpri* had flown. On the opposite side to us was a large crack between the Gutter's slope and the roof. 'They took him that way.'

'Goddess help us... help him.' Jenna dropped to her knees. Head bowed she stared at the helmet in her hands. 'I have to find him.'

'But...'

'Don't say it.' She snarled and threw the helmet into the darkness. 'He's still alive.'

'But Jenna...' How could I tell her the creatures looked to be ripping him apart?

'It's a twin thing.' Jenna jumped to her feet, 'I'd know if he was dead.' She leapt over the channel and headed towards the crack. What could I say to stop her?

Family was family.

She reached the crack and was gone.

I started to climb the Gutter again. Time lost meaning but an urgency nipped at my heels. I paused on a ledge catching my breath. A tumble of small boulders lay scattered at the other end. The *Vezpri* nested in rock clusters. Had Ned disturbed one? There was a splatter of fresh blood and claw marks. The boot prints had vanished and there was no evidence of anyone ahead.

Where was Angus?

I kept moving, checking gaps and fissures, dipping my hands into pools of muck. The crown could have lodged anywhere. My legs started to ache, and arms burned with effort. The walls closed in and sweat beaded my forehead. The stink of festering dung made breathing hard, and my eyes started to water.

‘Don’t give in!’ I growled at myself. ‘Keep going – Keep going ...’ I thought of home. Crystal clear sea, golden sands, fertile forests and a warm gentle breeze from the south. I smiled at the memories. ‘Don’t stop –’

Something clanged above me and my senses snapped into high alert, was it Angus?

I shone my light towards the sound and frowned at the bars of a large grate crisscrossing the Gutter’s channel. Black filth seeped through the gaps and a large pile of trash had built up on the other side. My heart thumped and blood pounded in my ears. What if the crown was here? What would happen if I found it?

I climbed over the grate and stared at the large pool behind it.

Could anything live in it? There was only one way to find out. I waded into the sludge hoping nothing would pull me under. My feet found a ledge and I started sifting through the waste, hauling handfuls of stinking rot away from the grate. There was nothing to recognise except a bits of bone, stones and something round like... a skull.

Was it the King’s head?

I stared at the bulge covered in thick strands of black slime. It could be anything, a dead rat, a drowned bat, a rock. I held the mage light between my teeth and grabbed whatever it was with both hands. It was solid and felt heavy ... I pulled – hard. There was no resistance and I staggered backward, lost my footing and fell into the stream of dragon’s dung with a loud *SPLASH!*

No – No – NO... My teeth bit down on the mage light. I strained to keep the slop out of my mouth. The cold ooze of muck filled my boots, my gloves, my clothes, dragging me down... until – my butt sat in the channel and the stream of filth sloshed around my ears.

I was sat in dragon crap. The stench was so bad I couldn’t smell anymore.

But – I still held the skull or ... whatever it was.

If Angus was close it would be the perfect time for him to make his move. I scrambled to my feet, climbed out of the channel and stood listening for any sound of the boy.

Nothing.

I set the thing on a rock shelf and ripped my gloves off, using them to wipe as much crap off me as possible. I emptied my boots and wrung out the vest. I was a mess. But the mage light still worked and I picked up my prize. It was the size of a dried coconut, metallic and ... I wiped away the slime – there was a glitter of jewels... *Jewels?*

This had to be the CROWN!

My hands started to shake and breath caught. A surge of excitement crashed through me. The crown had melted but I reckoned it looked better than most things after being swallowed by a dragon. I couldn't stifle a bubble of laughter growing in my chest. It popped past my lips and bounced around the darkness.

All I had to do was climb back down, and grab Jax.

But where was Angus? Could the blood smeared on the ledge below be his? I'd assumed it was Ned's, but maybe it wasn't? Or was that wishful thinking?

I stuffed the crown into my vest. Checked the rocks as far as the light would reach and started to descend. Darkness and shadows crowded behind me. I passed the bloody ledge, and the outcrop of rock I'd hidden under.

A sliver of pale sunlight marked the entrance below.

I started to breathe easier and quickened my pace. The entrance was so close I could feel the warmth of sunlight pushing into the darkness. I whistled our secret tune and waited.

Feet scuffled on the rocks.

'Jax?' I peered into the shadows. 'Jax ... where are you?'

'Right here.' Angus stepped out, dragging Jax with him.

My eyes narrowed and hands curled into fists. 'Let him go.'

'Give me the crown.' Angus edged towards the channel. 'Or Jax is going for a swim.'

'Leave him.' I shook my head, 'it's me you want.'

‘I *want* ...’ Angus glanced at the bulge in my vest, ‘... the crown!’

They’d reached the channel. Jax stared at me with wide eyes, his body stiff with fear.

I couldn’t tackle both of them without risking Jax falling into the crap. There was no way to tell how deep the channel was. If Jax sank into it would I be able to find him? Angus wrapped his big hand into the rags Jax wore and pushed him closer to the edge.

‘*DON’T.*’ I took a step towards them holding out my hands. ‘Angus ... *please.*’

Angus snarled and dangled Jax over the channel.

‘Here...’ I pulled the crown from my vest. ‘Here, it’s yours.’

Angus glared. ‘That’s not the crown.’

‘It’s melted!’ I held my light close to the jewels. A prism of rainbow colours chased away the shadows and shone in Angus’s eyes. ‘It’s all yours...’ I threw the crown and made a dive for Jax.

Time slowed.

The crown flew through the air in a high arc. Angus let go of Jax and tried to catch it – but missed... He turned tripped over his own feet and staggered after it.

‘*Kells!*’ Jax flailed in the air.

I slammed into the ground and slid towards him. My hands reached out. Fingers locking around his wrist but I kept sliding as his fall dragged me over the edge. I kicked out trying to wedge my feet into a gap.

Jax hit the sludge and started to sink

My knee caught in a crack. Jagged pain ripped through my leg but I jerked to a stop and managed to hold onto Jax. The black flow of muck sucked at his body.

I heard the crown rolling away followed by the heavy footfalls of Angus.

‘Hold on.’ I groaned through gritted teeth and tried to pull Jax up, but didn’t have the strength. I tried again... and again.

‘Looks like your stuck?’ Angus stood at the entrance cradling the crown to his chest. He stared at me with cold eyes. A sneer twisted his top lip. ‘I win and you ...’ he started laughing. ‘You lose.’ He turned and ran.

‘Jax,’ my voice was strained. He blinked up at me. ‘Kick your boots off... and climb.’

‘I – I can’t.’

‘Do it.’ My fingers were starting to slip.

Jax wriggled in my grasp trying to shake off the boots. I’d lost Shona, I wasn’t going to lose Jax – my grip tightened. His body popped to the surface and Jax started to climb. The stinking sludge sucked at his sodden rags.

‘Climb over me.’ I felt his body shake with effort as he grabbed the leather vest. ‘Keep going.’

Jax pulled himself up and out of the channel, groaning with relief.

I pushed my hands into the slime and found a hand hold ... and another. Gritting my teeth I twisted around, grabbed the edge and followed Jax. I rolled onto my back staring up at the roof. Long, pale stalagmites glittered in the sunlight. My knee throbbed and every muscle ached.

It was a long walk back to the castle.

‘Come on.’ I pushed to my feet, stood up and groaned at my swollen knee.

Jax slipped my arm over his narrow shoulders. ‘Lean on me.’

We walked out of the Gutter’s mouth together. The bridge swayed in a gentle breeze. There were no signs of the others. But Grunt would be somewhere, waiting to chain us back to the cart. I looked down at Jax, ‘you should stay here.’

He frowned.

‘I’ll tell them you didn’t make it.’ I nodded over my shoulder. ‘Wait here until it’s dark and then ... Find your way home.’

‘No.’ Jax shook his head.

‘It’s your best chance.’

‘I don’t care.’ He gripped my arm tighter and I didn’t have the strength to argue.

Clouds gathered on the horizon and smothered the sun. I limped along the path with Jax at my side. A spatter of rain filled the air and marked the rocks looming over us. Our footsteps slowed. The cart was around the next bend.

I couldn’t hear any voices or the bray of mules. Had they left? We turned the corner and almost tripped over Angus sprawled in front of us. A look of surprise was fixed on his face and crossbow bolt stuck out of his chest. I stepped in front of Jax to protect him and scanned the open space.

There was no sign of anyone or the cart. Grey dust blew across the ground sticking to Angus. To his clothes. To his boots.

The crown was gone.

‘Kells...’ Jax squeezed my arm and pointed. ‘Is that – is she – the one who ate the king?’

‘What?’ I looked up and gasped. Great Red circled above.

The dragon swooped towards us then paused in mid-flight delicately beating her wings. She extended her back legs, clawed feet touched down and wings folded. Her golden gaze looked straight at us... At Jax... At me... my gaze locked onto Great Red’s and a deep soft voice hummed in my ears.

‘*Kellisandra Onyx.*’ She knew my name. *‘I would choose you... If you think me worthy.’*

Worthy? What? ... A dragon was in my head! And not just any dragon – the one who ate the king.

‘*That wasn’t the King.*’ She sounded disgusted.

I thought my words at her. *‘It wasn’t?’*

‘*It was a shifter.*’ Red’s glittering scales rippled with a shudder. *‘The castle’s been infected.’*

A shapeshifter? I thought they were a myth.

‘*It made my guts sour,*’ the dragon grumbled. *‘The Magi have sent an enclave.’*

I had no idea what an enclave was.

'You'll learn or not ... depending upon your choice.'

My choice ... *'Has anyone ever refused a dragon's request?'*

Her large eyes grew wider and head tilted to one side. *'It has been known.'*

'You are more than worthy...' I couldn't tease her any longer. *'I choose you.'*

An internal flame ignited within my chest, wrapping around my heart and burning with the heat of a star. Energy sang along every bone, shimmered down every nerve reaching the tips of my fingers and toes. My thoughts filled with a dragon's unswerving love and I grinned at *'Frey.'*

'Indeed,' Frey's eyes flickered with humour. *'Although I did like Great Red.'*

'Kells,' Jax pulled at my arm. *'What's wrong?'*

'Nothing.' I squeezed his shoulder.

He stared at Frey then looked at Angus. *'What about him?'*

'He was ambushed.' Frey's voice held a hard edge. *'I flamed the cowards.'*

An image of Grunt and the others attacking Angus flashed in my mind. They fought over the crown and disappeared in a blast of flame. The grey dust was ash!

'What happened to the crown?'

Frey leaned forward and extended a set of talons towards Jax. Held between long black claws the melted crown shone bright in the dull light. Jax pressed close to me.

I nodded at the crown. *'It's for you.'*

'For me?' His eyes grew wide.

'Yeah.' I smiled as Jax took the melted crown from Frey.

I couldn't leave Angus on the path. There was a niche at the base of a large rock and I rolled his body into it. Heavy rain began to fall and washed the ash of his murderers away. I found enough stones to build a cairn around him. Jax stood at my side and together we spoke the words of passage. *'Carry the light in your heart to the ancestors, and may your spirit run forever free.'*

'You've honoured your enemy.' Frey's presence wrapped around me like a soothing balm.

'Are we taking the crown back?' Jax didn't sound keen.

'Of course,' I nodded at him. 'The new king or queen will need it.'

Jax frowned at my leg. 'It's a long way.'

'I don't think we're walking.' I nodded at Frey and Jax grinned.

The beautiful red dragon. My beautiful dragon reared up, and shook the rain from her wings. *'To me Kellisandra Onyx, my heart, my rider.'*